THE CASE OF THE MISSING SANDALS

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THE CASE OF THE MISSING SANDALS

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THE CASE OF THE MISSING SANDALS

NANCY BARR MAVITY

THE CASE OF THE MISSING SANDALS

A Peter Piper Detective Story

The newspapers called it "the witchcraft murder"—but Peter Piper knew that the famous and beautiful Luna's missing sandals were the key to some power more sinister and terrible than witchcraft . . . .

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FIRST EDITION

TO

NANCY, Junior

BELOVED COMRADE

THE CASE OF THE MISSING SANDALS

CHAPTER I

Two men sat lingering over their coffee at a balcony table in the big, noisy restaurant. The luncheon crowd had thinned out, leaving a circle of empty, cluttered tables about them, but the waitress showed no impatience to remove their cups and saucers.

The two men presented an interesting study in contrasting types. It was not disinterested observation, however, which had led the waitress to hover over them with unnecessary service, neglecting her other customers. She stood now with the corner of a tray laden with dishes propped on the edge of an adjoining table, oblivious of an overturned pitcher of cream whose contents trickled to the floor, and strained her ears to catch every word of their conversation. For the two men were talking about murder—talking casually and yet intimately, with the addition of certain spectacular and gruesome details which had not found their way into the newspapers.

The first man sat upright, his shoulders well back, depositing each half-inch segment of cigar ash neatly in the tray before him. He was handsome in a stalwart, not-too-fine-drawn fashion, with crisp blond hair crinkling up from a ruddy forehead. The neatness of his well-pressed suit held no suggestion of dandyism but reinforced the air of order and scrubbed cleanliness that emanated from him. No late hours or pressure of business was ever allowed to interfere with his four-mile walk before breakfast, and though he was now in the middle thirties, he still retained indefinably the look of the college athlete.

The contrast between the two men was symbolized by their different methods of disposal of their tobacco ash. The second man ignored the ash tray, waving his cigarette in long gesticulating fingers until its ashes fell indiscriminately on the floor, into his half-empty coffee cup, or upon his lap. His coat was wrinkled up his back, as he slouched his preposterous length halfway down in his chair. His black hair was badly in need of cutting, but his long, ugly, intelligent face with bright gray eyes shining from behind thick-lensed glasses was illumined by an incorrigible enthusiasm which cast externals into the oblivion to which Peter Piper habitually consigned them.

The first man was Hubert Graham, district attorney. Yet he deferred with an affection tinged with strong respect to the young crime reporter of the *Herald,* even when Peter's wildly waving cigarette flung a scattering film of gray ashes upon the district attorney's immaculate silk tie.

"If you hadn't found more of a *corpus delicti* than that one blood spot before the end of the trial, you'd have been sunk," Peter was saying.

"I didn't find it—you did," the district attorney answered genially. He ostentatiously pushed the ash tray across the table in Peter's direction, but the reporter disregarded the gesture.

"I got interested," Peter said half-deprecatingly. "It was entertaining to spot the little grains of truth among all those lies. Nobody without more imagination than Claypool had could keep up to the level of creative invention all the time."

"You can call it entertaining if you want to! But if he'd kept us guessing where he'd hidden the body until the end of the trial, the jury would never have brought in a first-degree verdict without recommendation."

They were discussing a peculiarly atrocious wife murder which had held the front pages of the papers for weeks, until Claypool's conviction three days before.

"That's what you lawyers get for using Latin," Peter said severely. "No amount of pounding will convince the average juror that *corpus delicti* doesn't mean a corpse, all laid out complete. But the thing that has kept me puzzling about Claypool is why he did it."

"He did it to get rid of his wife so he could marry the other woman."

"Of course!" Peter made an impatient gesture which sent his cup spinning sidewise across the saucer. "But there are so many easier ways of doing that. He didn't have to 'chop her into little bits, particularly small' like the chap in the *Bab Ballad*. The funny thing is that everybody says he hadn't a violent temper. All those character witnesses testified that he had never been heard to say a harsh word to anyone."

"Such a lot of murders aren't committed by typical murderers," Graham said with some asperity. "And you can't make a neat little list of motives, either. Love, greed, revenge—it's all piffle to make it as simple as that. If we only knew in advance what sort of people were likely to commit murders and what they were likely to do it for, we'd have a better time in the D.A.'s office—but I suppose you press hounds would miss a lot of fun. You just never can tell—that's the devil of it."

"'Let not your angry passions rise,'" Peter murmured provocatively.

"Well, look at the cranks who come to me with complaints," Graham said defensively. "They've no idea of law, but they come with a red-hot grievance. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it blows over. The hundredth time it blows up. Yesterday, for instance—— by the way, maybe there's a story for you in that, Peter."

"My God!" Peter groaned in derision. "There you go again! Everybody thinks I just grin all over my face at the suggestion of a story. As if I hadn't had enough trouble,

hunting up your corpse and covering Claypool's trial and everything. Here I am with a moment's breathing space which enables me to take two hours for lunch in your cheerful society—though what our esteemed city editor will think of that won't bear thinking of—and you think you're doing me a favor by suggesting that I might go out and make trouble for myself by hunting up a story!"

"It's just a suggestion." Graham was unperturbed. "Our office can't touch it. Of course, if you're not interested . . ." His voice hung fire, elaborately.

For answer, Peter recalled the transfixed waitress.

"If you'll bring us some fresh coffee," he said with an impudent grin, "we'll promise not to say an interesting word till you come back!"

When the waitress returned, however, the neat blond head and the rumpled black one were close together. With a flounce of her starched apron and an ostentatious rattling of dishes, she retreated, hopeless of catching any distinguishing words from the low murmur of voices.

"Did you ever hear of the Luna Colony?" Graham was asking.

"Vaguely." Peter's face was alert and grave. "A bunch of harmless nuts out in the hills. Vegetarians or something, aren't they?"

"Vegetarians, nothing. It's a witchcraft cult."

"Shades of Salem!" Peter leaned back, his mobile face, despite his derisive words, alight with lively curiosity.

"Ever been out there?"

"Never."

"Well, from all I can make out, the colony is in the hands of a very astute crook."

"The usual sucker bait?"

"Nothing usual about it. At least, not in the woman that runs it."

"A woman? The plot thickens. But I suppose she's fat and oily and wears imitation velvet robes, like all the rest of them."

"That woman," Graham said solemnly, "keeps under cover and out of trouble. But she has more of a following than you'd think. From all I can make out, she's sort of an Evangelist in reverse. She gets them, somehow."

"Well, if they like riding on broomsticks, I suppose it's their own business," Peter said tolerantly.

But Graham refused to accede to the reporter's lapse of interest.

"Sooner or later, trouble's going to break out there, as sure as God made little apples," he said earnestly.

"Such as what?" Graham caught the light of revived curiosity in Peter's eyes behind their protecting lenses.

"It's nothing our office can touch at the moment, as I told you," Graham went on with renewed assurance.

"But you've got something on the broomstick lady?" Peter asked.

"That's just it, we haven't. Yesterday a man came to see me, mad as a hatter, accusing this Luna, as she calls herself, of having cast some kind of hypnotic spell over his wife. So far as I can make out, the spell is of the familiar sort exercised by clever confidence workers over their dumb victims."

"Well, then, it's right in your line, isn't it, if the gink was ready to swear a complaint?"

"Complaint, nothing! He has plenty of complaint but nothing that could lead to an arrest, or even an official investigation, without fizzling out and making us all look silly. For all that, he's just lost a cool $20,000 to this Luna person, and he's fairly annoyed."

"He wants it back?"

"He wants it back, but he won't get it. Name of Lewis Tanner, by the way. A little, gray, middle-aged chap. Last

winter a bout of pneumonia left him with weak lungs, so he decided to sell his business in Illinois and come to California. He'd saved enough to retire on for a while, regain his health, and then look around for something out here. He sent his wife out two or three months ahead, while he wound up the tag ends of his business. That's his yarn, anyway, and it sounds straight. And with his wife he sent his entire bank savings of $20,000, with which she was to look about for a place to buy and settle down on. The money was transferred to a bank out here, in her name."

"Hm," Peter grunted. "And the loony lady did her out of it?"

"When Tanner got here, he found that his wife had given the whole $20,000, lock, stock, and barrel, to the Luna Colony."

"And what," Peter inquired, "was she supposed to get for the twenty thousand? The City Hall?"

"Nothing so easy. It was a free gift, and the money was in Mrs. Tanner's own name. So far as I can make out, Mrs. Tanner was convinced that they'd all get some kind of occult power that would bring them wealth and restore her husband's health. But there weren't any exact promises. There wasn't even any receipt. I hoped we might catch her for practising medicine without a license, but she was too clever to leave that loop-hole open."

"It looks as if Friend Tanner had better just charge it up to experience, as many another sucker has done before him," Peter said cynically.

"He's not so philosophical about it. Maybe you wouldn't be either, if you'd lost all your life's savings. Moreover, his wife and he had a tremendous set-to about it, and now she's left him and gone to live at the colony. You spoke a little while ago about the queer people who commit murders." Graham drank the remains of his cooling coffee at a gulp

and replaced the cup meticulously in the center of the saucer.

"Well, that little mild gray man from Illinois is mad clean through. I don't say he has the nerve, or the temperament, or the opportunity to commit murder. But I do say that he was in the state of mind yesterday when he'd like to, especially after I told him there was nothing we could do about it. And there may be others similarly inclined. That's why I say that sooner or later something's going to pop wide open at the Luna Colony."

"Well, it's happened before," Peter demurred. "The woods are full of cults supported by the credulity or the starved imaginations of their followers. And nothing ever seems to happen to them."

"I don't think this one is quite so ordinary," Graham insisted.

"There you have it!" Peter sat bolt upright with a suddenness that sent his napkin sliding to the floor. "The *Herald* isn't out conducting any crusades and exposures. It doesn't get us anywhere. But this Luna person now—she's caught my roving fancy somehow. We've let the Luna Colony mush along without paying any special attention to it, but if it's getting into big money, that's something else again. You say the leader of it is good looking?"

"So far as I can gather at third hand, she's beautiful—fascinating—magnetic—something like that."

"Too good to be true altogether," Peter said warily. "But I'll tell you what I'll do. If she's good looking, and will stand for pictures, she's good for a feature anyway. I'll buzz out there and see how far I can get in talking to her. It'll be a lot of hokum, of course. But I'll take as much of a look-see as I can, and if I run across anything that looks in your line, I'll let you know."

Peter slowly untwisted his elongated form and rose to his feet.

"If I don't get back to the office," he said, "Jimmy will

be tearing the editorial eye-shade to ribbands. I think I'll wander out to the Luna Colony this very afternoon. Just think, if I got an interview with pictures, and then the gentleman from Illinois bumped the lady off, how very opportune it would be!"

CHAPTER II

PETER PIPER'S mood of disgruntled cynicism deepened steadily as he maneuvered his battered car around the sharp curves of the narrow, snakelike road that wound its rutted course upward into the hills. An outreaching tentacle of the city—a newly opened subdivision with jerry-built apartment houses advertising the advantages of their distant view of San Francisco Bay—lay only a scant half mile behind him, but the tortuous course of the road had almost immediately hidden the city behind the shoulder of the hill, and gave the canyon an effect of remoteness.

As he jerked his car around another bend, Peter cursed his easily stimulated curiosity, and Graham, who had known so well how to play upon it. He knew these tawdry, pseudo-mystical cults, with their ignorant, stupid, emotionally starved adherents! Graham had hinted that this one was different, but they were all essentially alike. They distributed verbose and vaporous tracts, and occasionally they were defendants in unsavory court cases whose details could only be hinted at in the press.

To be sure, the Luna Colony had not issued any tracts, so far as Peter knew, and had thus far received no publicity, self-sought or otherwise. As for Luna herself, Peter's transiently stirred interest had waned almost to the vanishing point. She would be as tawdry as others of her kind—a mere petty crook, without sufficient brains even for a big-time confidence game.

Still, twenty thousand dollars wasn't so small for a single haul! And Graham had seemed assured, both that the woman

herself was in some degree remarkable and that serious trouble would sooner or later break out with Luna as its focal point. Peter was not at all sure whether his present errand was to warn her of danger from Tanner or to seek a chink in her legal armor which would warrant exposing her. On the one hand, he had scant sufferance for fools—and on the other, knaves who battened on the mental malnutrition of their rickety-minded victims left him with a decided bad taste in the mouth.

His morose reflections were cut short by the sudden appearance of an obstruction across the road. It was a gate of heavy meshed wire, to which was attached a board bearing the familiar inscription, "Private Property." As Peter nosed his car up to the barrier and swung his long legs to the ground, he noted that the gate furnished the opening in an equally stout high fence, partially concealed by a heavy windbreak of eucalyptus trees which curved in a wide circle on each side of the road. Despite the inhospitable appearance of the barrier, Peter's car had evidently not approached unnoticed, for the gates swung partly open before he reached them. A massively built negro, gnarled and twisted as one of the live-oak trees on the hill slope, stood in the aperture. Behind him Peter glimpsed the open door of a small cabin, its outer walls of rough bark making it almost invisible among the trees.

"Is Madame Luna here?" They always called themselves "madame," Peter reflected sardonically.

The old man bowed his grizzled head in silence. Then, to Peter's astonishment, he lifted his huge hands and ran his fingers lightly across Peter's face.

"You have not been here before," he announced with quiet definiteness.

Peter, blinking in amazement at the unexpected gesture, noticed for the first time that the wrinkled lids over the old man's eyes were shut. He was totally blind.

"No, I haven't," Peter admitted. "But I'm interested. I'd like to learn something about the colony—perhaps to join it."

"You'd never join," the old man said. "You don't sound right for that. Your voice—— No," he shook his head slowly, "I know voices. Voices are all I've had for forty years. You'd better let Luna alone."

There was no disrespect in his use of the name. His tone somehow conveyed to Peter that it would have been as inappropriate to apply a title to Luna as to speak of Mr. Jehovah. His wrinkled face expanded in a grin, at once sinister and astute.

"No, sir," he repeated, betraying for the first time a faint trace of negro accent, "you better leave Luna alone."

"You're pretty clever, Uncle," Peter responded cheerfully. "But you just take my card to her all the same, and tell her that someone has told me something I think she ought to know."

The grin on the old man's face deepened.

"I guess Luna knows already more than you've ever had a chance to forget," he said. Nevertheless he extended his hand for the card, latched the gates carefully behind him, and hobbled with surprising swiftness and agility up the path whose turning almost immediately hid him from Peter's view.

Despite himself, Peter felt his nerves tighten in unaccustomed tension as he waited.

"Stage setting!" he muttered contemptuously. Yet he was forced to admit that something in the old man's appearance of physical strength, like a huge and aged tree, his acuteness of touch and hearing, and the absoluteness of his faith, had sent a slight tremor of uncertainty across Peter's cocksure expectations.

The ancient negro was no chatterbox. He swung into view again on the path, his long knotted arms curved at his

sides, gorilla-fashion, and opened the gates without a word. As Peter stood uncertainly in the driveway, the old man pointed along the way he had come.

"The door is open," he said. "Go in and wait. Luna will come."

With an abrupt shift of mood, Peter strode rapidly along the path to the open doorway of a sturdily built, one-story structure of rustic logs which came in view a short distance beyond the bend in the path.

"Hocus-pocus!" he declaimed to the trees with a somewhat exaggerated annoyance.

Yet he was forced to admit, as he stood in the doorway accustoming his eyes to the transition from the sunshine outside to the relative dimness of the interior, that it was somewhat unusual hocus-pocus. The white-walled room was austere and bare as the hall of a nunnery. But its furnishings, though meager, betrayed a subtle warfare of the spirit. The two or three commonplace chairs jarred with the only other articles of furniture—a small chest of heavily carved dark wood with a massive brass lock which stood in one corner, and a bench of some white stone, resembling marble, against the opposite wall.

Directly above the bench were placed, in glaring contrast, the only two decorations of the bare walls—a familiar plaque of Joan of Arc, kneeling before the stake, and, set on a shelf just beneath it, a primitive African carving in wood. Peter crossed the room and, leaning forward with one knee on the marble bench, examined the figurine more closely. As he stared at the miniature face, its features so distorted that they bore a semblance scarcely human, a prickle, half of æsthetic appreciation, half of acute distaste, ran up and down his spine. Something in the arrangement of those half-obliterated, grotesque features carried so deep an impression of immemorial evil that the abysses of dark, subconscious impulse, timeless and nameless, seemed to open

before him as he looked. With an uncontrollable shudder, Peter shook himself free of the spell.

"It's just some funny monkey business of lines and curves," he muttered defensively.

"You think so?"

Peter whirled at the sound of a voice behind him. His embarrassment found vent in a surge of annoyance, but anger in turn vanished in sheer astonishment at the figure which stood, obviously posed for his observation, in the center of the room.

In the first place, Graham was right. She was beautiful. Not even the theatrical symbolism of the layer upon layer of some black gauzelike material which enswathed her from head to foot and the silver crescent bound across her forehead could make her look ridiculous in the eyes of the cynically unimpressionable reporter.

Peter's eyes were trained to instantaneous analysis, even when, as now, he felt himself caught at a disadvantage. His recognition of the one dominant fact of her beauty was followed almost immediately by the mental note that she was no longer young—in her thirties, at least, Peter decided with the harsh judgment of youth. Even while the mellow tones of her deep, honeysmooth voice lingered in the air, Peter had grasped and tabulated the warring elements in the face that confronted him, dramatically conscious of its inevitable impression.

The eyes alone gave a hint of the fanatic. They were wide, large, and almost disconcertingly bright, of a curious topaz-hazel color which very nearly matched the heavy bands of honey-colored hair that weighed her head in defiance of the current fashion. Her beauty lay in her coloring, in the unrouged skin with the smooth, heavy whiteness of magnolia petals against the topaz flame of her over-brilliant eyes and the sinuous coils of gleaming hair, and the dynamic force of her personality, rather than in the molding of her

features. The mouth was heavy and sensual, but the chin beneath it was unexpectedly square and stubborn.

Self-willed chin, sensual mouth, fanatical eyes. Peter, dropping his gaze to the large, firmly molded hands with curving, pointed fingers, decided that they belonged with the chin—grasping, predatory hands, for all their smooth-skinned whiteness. At the same instant Peter reached the flat and by no means accustomed conclusion that he was in the presence of someone whose wits were more than a match for his own.

Luna had withstood his prolonged scrutiny without a trace of embarrassment. She now brought it to an end, taking the situation in hand with calm authority.

"You have nothing to give me that I need, and you do not belong to those who take what I have to give," she said in her low yet reverberating voice.

A sudden flare of resentment brought a quick flush to Peter's face. The resentment was due to his recognition that ordinary cajolery and subterfuge would not go far with the woman before him. The usual technic of "getting the story" would be useless here. But with it came a swift defensive reaction—she might be smart, but he wasn't so dumb. She needn't pull that oracular stuff on him.

"Let's talk like human beings—you mean you don't think newspaper publicity is valuable in your line," he said sharply.

Luna smiled—a broad, provocative smile that seemed to beat upon the air with waves of warmth.

"You wouldn't dislike me so much if you didn't recognize in me a power that makes you uneasy," she said.

"I recognize your sex appeal, as the movies call it, but I'm immune," Peter said brutally. "All the same, you're so different from what I expected that I'm interested. And I really do feel like warning you that you're skating on rather thin ice. There's trouble in the offing, and it goes by the

name of one Lewis Tanner. He's rather argumentative about the financial arrangements of your colony, you know."

Peter was watching for the effect of his words, yet the effect, when it came, sent his eyebrows cocking upward in astonishment. The half-lowered eyelids lifted over Luna's eyes—they seemed literally to expand and to blaze upon him with inward light.

"Do you suppose that a man like Tanner, or anyone else, could touch me—could break the faith of my followers?" Although her voice was not raised, each word was like the stroke of a gong. "I have the passionate devotion of hundreds—they might easily be thousands if I sought adherents, instead of waiting for them to come to me. If they were shown evidence that I had committed eleven murders, they would still believe in me!"

"I heard the most popular woman evangelist of the day say almost exactly the same thing, once," Peter rejoined. "But it didn't keep her out of an embarrassing grand-jury investigation, all the same. It's just occurred to me that you're a good deal alike, you two. Both of you know how to get money, and have tremendous personal magnetism, and I imagine that most people would say that either money or love was the mainspring of character in both of you. But I don't think so. I never thought so of her, and I don't of you. You're both clever as the very devil. You were bound to make a spectacular personal success in one way or another, no matter when or where you were born. Some trick of environment made her take the stage of evangelism, and led you to—this."

Peter waved his hand vaguely backward at the leering carving on the wall, with the white plaque of Saint Joan above. "But I believe it's power you worship—not abstract money power, but power over human beings, the thirst for what you both called their 'passionate devotion.'" Peter paused, out of breath. It was a tribute to the woman's per-

sonality that he had poured out his real feelings with a sincerity and a frankness which he had been far from intending or foreseeing.

"That woman!" The yellow eyes blazed scorn. "Her religion is a mere upstart growth—a silly, common, daylight thing. Mine goes back into the darkness. There are fewer to understand the power of darkness, but the power of darkness is supreme over the power of light."

Something in the reiterated phrase awoke an echo in Peter's memory. "The powers of darkness." It connected with another phrase used by Graham in speaking of the Luna Colony. Graham had said something about witchcraft. The power of darkness—witchcraft—devil worship—Luna. Luna of course meant the moon. The silver crescent on a slender fillet half hidden in Luna's hair confirmed the reference. Somewhere or other he had read that the antique pagan worship of Diana, the moon goddess, had been involved in the Christian-evoked demonism of the Middle Ages. The moon was always somehow connected with the witches' rites.

But in the Twentieth Century! There had been some sort of newspaper yarn about the celebration of the Black Mass in modern New York. There had been the witchcraft murders in Pennsylvania, and the Marchand case in Buffalo—but those were surely among ignorant, isolated people. It was absurd to suppose that in this age of radio and jazz, not more than half a mile from street cars and telephone stations, there lived a woman who seriously called herself a witch, and people who actually believed in the twisted religion of demonism. His eyes veered again to the leering, monstrous, and yet somehow compelling image on the wall, and then to the white masklike serenity of the sainted Maid above it.

"But I don't see," he burst out unexpectedly, "what Joan of Arc has to do with it!"

As if in following the glance of his eyes she had also followed the course of his thoughts, Luna answered gravely, with no trace of surprise at his irrelevance: "If you had bothered to read in the right places, you would know that Joan of Arc was one of the famous witches of all time. Even if you hadn't, you might have guessed between the lines of her history."

Peter's face was a blank mask of amazement before the quiet conviction of her tone. Certainly she was not crazy —not too crazy to bilk Tanner, for one instance, out of $20,000. Was it possible that she really believed what she was saying? There was her flare of apparently unmotivated rage at his comparison of her with the fabulously successful evangelist—a rage tinged with jealous intensity as if they were indeed rival claimants for religious power. That chance comparison of his had evidently stung her to defensive speech. It had opened the gates, where suaver methods of approach would have failed.

"You wouldn't even have to read a great deal," she said with half-contemptuous pride, "to guess that the rebellion of the revolting angels ended not in defeat but in victory. When you look at the world about you, who do you think has the balance of power—Satan or God? The majority are afraid to face the truth. They want the soft God of love, a comfortable God, not the Power that wrings men's hearts with fear."

There was no gainsaying her earnestness. She might be a crook, among other things, but she was not merely playing on the credulity of the simple-minded. She was at least half self-deceived. With a swift stab of intuition, Peter grasped at the reason.

"You aren't just making all this up," he said candidly. "I imagine you were brought up in a very strict religious atmosphere. And the time came when you wouldn't or couldn't

submit. When you broke away, you didn't just ease out—you were driven into the direct antithesis of all that had gone before."

Luna nodded her head slowly.

"Yes," she said, "you are right. You were clever to guess it. It was my father—he was an itinerant preacher. He believed that his poverty was directly connected with his superior righteousness." Her voice was incredibly bitter; each word was somehow expelled like a curse.

"I'll venture another guess," Peter continued. "You fell in love, very young. If you'll pardon me for saying so, your type couldn't escape it. And I suppose he didn't like that."

"He would have thrown me out," Luna said simply, "only I went. He said he'd pursue me with God's vengeance. He's given the rest of his life to that—when he could get the money for it. But I turned my back on his penury and his righteousness and his denial of life." Her voice had sunk to a half whisper, oblivious of Peter's presence.

The silence of the room was charged with an emotion which excluded Peter. He felt himself a remote onlooker of that battleground of strange and conflicting passions. Did the woman really believe any of this crazy stuff she had been saying, or was she "playing up" with an elaborate exhibition of make-believe? She was histrionic enough and clever enough to have staged the whole show. Yet Peter could not shake off the impression that twice, for an instant, flashes of absolute sincerity had pierced the murk.

The leaping triumph in her voice when she had spoken of her power over her followers, their "passionate devotion"—that was real. The primal urge had revealed itself in that fugitive moment. And there was something else. The bitterness with which she spoke of her father was shot through with fear. The influence of that harsh, fanatical early training had not been shaken off.

She had not ceased to believe in her father's religion. She had revolted from it, she had joined battle with it—but one did not battle with shadows. She had taken sides with the "revolting angels." The amazing thing was that she partly—perhaps subconsciously—believed in the reality of that blasphemy. But why—why—why (the reiterated question thudded across Peter's consciousness with repeated hammer blows) had she given him those two glimpses of her ultimate reality? He shook himself together with a visible hunching of the shoulders.

"You certainly have turned your back on penury, all right," he said, answering her last words with brutal cynicism. If she were play-acting—well, anger was a powerful solvent of calculated deception. But the woman before him was not to be so easily drawn. Her smile challenged the obviousness of his tactics.

"Satan hates fools," she said. "If they didn't give their money to me, they'd squander it foolishly in some other way—buying wildcat stocks or handing it over to your evangelist friend. So why shouldn't I have it?" The fanatical light had died out of her eyes. Was she just an able crook, after all?

"All the same, sometimes the worm turns——"

"Pouf!" Luna snapped strong white fingers almost in Peter's face. "Do you suppose I am afraid of Tanner and his like? Your modern law does not recognize witchcraft. I am not afraid of the law."

Something uneasy in her asseveration, or perhaps a faint emphasis on the last word, sent Peter's eyebrows cocking upward.

"You are afraid of something then?"

"Yes, I am afraid of something." The words were quietly spoken, but Peter noted that the long white fingers were tightly entwined in her lap. "Why else do you suppose I have talked to you? You can't use a word of it in your

paper—there have been no witnesses, you know. If you said I posed as a witch, I could sue you for libel."

Peter grinned in frank appreciation of her point. Then his face sobered.

"What is it you are afraid of?" he asked.

"Satan will protect his own," she answered cryptically. "But—if anything should happen—there is at least someone who knows a little more than any one else."

She rose, with a gesture of obvious dismissal. Peter—a perplexed, bewildered, and somewhat annoyed Peter—found himself striding down the path, nodding abstractedly to the burly guardian of the gate, and stamping with unnecessary vehemence on the self-starter of his car.

"Bossy, old girl," he addressed the mechanism of the rattling vehicle with a puzzled frown, "can it be that she was just fooling us all along?"

But among all the thoughts that whirled through his mind as he jerked Bossy's wheel across the ruts of the steeply descending road Peter failed to guess the stark and astounding reality—that he and Bossy would career wildly up that road again in the fog of early morning, and that, except for the men and women who might have been implicated in her death, he was in all probability the last person to see Luna alive.

CHAPTER III

PETER sat at his desk, leisurely perusing the morning paper which he had filched from under the wire basket in front of the city editor.

"Yes, Willie!" The raucous voice of Jimmy Sears at the telephone did not distract Peter's attention from the page before him, yet he found himself glancing over his shoulder at the clock on the rear wall of the local room. Willie Hames, police reporter for the *Herald,* did not "come on" till eight o'clock. Despite his absorption in the paper, Peter's alert subconscious had drawn the accurate inference that something very peculiar indeed must have occurred to bring a telephone call from Willie an hour before he was supposed to be on duty.

"Yeah. Yeah." Jimmy's pencil scratched indecipherable notations on the yellow pad of paper before him. "Where in hell's that? The police haven't started yet? Good! My—aunt—Maria! When was the body discovered? Nice break! Too late for the morning papers. . . . Piper!"

The slam of the receiver on the hook and the simultaneous shouting of his name found Peter already halfway to the city desk, leaving the morning paper sprawled forgotten on the floor behind him. The hoarse croak of Jimmy's voice, rising suddenly to a delighted squawk, and the use of the hallowed expletive which marked Jimmy's most exalted moments had told him more plainly than words that something out of the ordinary had "broken."

Jimmy thrust the yellow sheet of notes across the desk.

"Woman found murdered. Up in the hills at the back of beyond—half a mile west of the end of Alvarado Avenue, Willie Hames says. The police just got a telephone call a few minutes ago. Inspector Oleson called Willie's home on it, bless his heart. They're just leaving. Step on it, Peter, and for God's sake don't get lost finding the place."

"I don't think I'll get lost," Peter said slowly. "Did the message say by any chance that the woman's name is Luna?"

"What are you anyway—a mind reader?" Jimmy dismissed the subject of Peter's clairvoyance by yanking his green celluloid eye-shade at a rakish angle over one ear. "If you are, just keep on being one. Some coon called up the police station from there, scared half to death. They couldn't get much out of him except that this Luna person had sold her soul to the devil and the devil had got her. Go out and see what you can find. It looks like a bang-up story."

Jimmy wasted no time in seeking an explanation for Peter's familiarity with the location of the road above Alvarado Avenue and the prescience with which he had named the victim of murder. He had already snatched the telephone receiver from its hook again as Peter, obeying the injunction to "step on it," shrugged his angular shoulders into his wrinkled coat and loped across the local room to the door. But something unusual in the manner of Peter's exit caused the city editor to rake his eye-shade upward and stare after the retreating reporter.

By all the rules of his temperament, Peter should have been in fine fettle. A "good" murder—one, moreover, which a kindly providence had allowed to break too late for the morning papers—should have sent his spirits soaring. Peter's macabre elation over the more sensational aspects of crime found habitual vent in a nerve-scraping whistle of a single minor phrase, repeated in endless circles. But though by rights the ears of the local-room staff should have been tortured by the familiar horrific strains of Peter's battle

cry, his departure had lacked the customary howls of protest from unwilling auditors.

Jimmy impatiently jiggled the hook of the telephone instrument and gazed frowning after the vanishing figure.

"I wonder what ails the kid?" he muttered. "God knows, I never thought I'd live to see the day when I yearned to hear his infernal racket. But he must be worried about something, and he hasn't even tackled the story yet, so what in thunder can be wrong with it?"

Peter's progress, however, was not altogether without sound accompaniment. His thumb was jammed steadily down on the button connecting with Bossy's horn as he sped through the city with complete disregard of stop signs and hurled the valiant little car around turn after turn of the road he had traversed the afternoon before. The trees dripped with early-morning fog, and the swirling white mists closed in impenetrably, a few feet beyond the smothered yellow glare of the headlights. Peter trusted blindly to luck that no other car would be descending the narrow road at that early hour. In fact, his mood was one of such bitter self-accusation that he would have accepted a collision as a stroke of poetic justice.

Luna had allowed him to see that she was afraid—and he had let it go at that, without even trying to find out the cause of her apprehension. Luna was dead. For some inexplicable reason, her terror had reached out to him. If anything happened to her, she believed she had placed in his hands the cue to understanding. The terror that haunted her had struck. And because he, like a shallow-pated fool, had less than half believed in her, rated her as half charlatan, half psychopath, he had made no effort to prod more deeply and discover the source of her fear. It was too late now—too late to ask the questions he had let slip. Luna was dead. He had missed his chance. He knew no more about the cause of her death than the traffic officer whose whistle had

pursued Bossy's vanishing tail-light at a down-town intersection.

"You goof!" Peter addressed himself through clenched teeth. "You've got to make up for being a double-dyed dolt, that's what you've got to do. You might have had this story sewed up, and you haven't. Well, you've just got to get it anyhow."

As Bossy skidded to a slithering stop before the gates, Willie Hames stepped across the path of the headlights and leaned over the door of the car.

"You'd better step inside," he said, motioning to the now wide-open gates. "The cops will be here any minute, and it's lots easier to keep people outside when they're out than to put 'em out, once they're in. I had a buzz at the old man who gave the alarm. Name of Albert Jackson. Negro watchman."

Peter nodded.

"He's no good at all—simply dithering. He opened the gates for me after I'd about yelled my head off; then he went tearing back into his cabin as if the spooks were after him. I couldn't get him to go within ten yards of the dame's house—he thinks Old Nick in person came and got her. All I can get out of him is that he got up at six o'clock this morning and went up the path. Probably he always does that, but it's no use asking him why he did anything—he's lost what wits he ever had."

Peter's eyebrow lifted. Jackson had not impressed him as witless, but superstitious terror might well have reduced him to a state of helpless hysteria.

"Anyway," Hames continued, "he found the door open and went in to investigate. He found this Luna person dead on a bench inside, and ran down the path. Luckily, he was too scared to linger around and move anything, and he had enough sense left to call the police station. That's all so far. I just got here a few minutes ago and haven't had

time to go up to the house yet. We'll trot along there now, if you like."

The two men, however, had barely reached the bend in the path when the sound of another car drawing up to the entrance was immediately followed by hurrying footsteps behind them.

"Hello, Sunshine!" Peter turned and greeted the foremost of the two advancing policemen with an impudent grin. "The *Herald* owes you a vote of thanks for spoiling Willie's morning nap. We just love to have him punished that way."

"You didn't lose much time," Oleson commented. "I left one of our men at the gate for the express purpose of keeping out any stray newspaper men till we were through looking around," he added pointedly.

"Oh, we've been here a long while," Peter answered mendaciously. "But we waited to go into the room until you got here. Since we were as polite as all that, the least you can do is to let us buzz along with you—yes?"

Peter, wheedling like a small boy, was an ingratiating figure. Oleson stared at him with a long straight look which said as plainly as words that he had no illusions about any consideration for police etiquette on Peter's part.

"If you'd been George Washington, you'd sure have handed out a swell alibi on that cherry-tree business," he said drily.

"Oh, well, you can't deny I'm sometimes useful," Peter suggested modestly.

"You're about as useful as a cat underfoot," Oleson said severely. "But now you're here, I suppose you might as well come along." He turned to the second policeman, who had followed him more slowly up the path. "You might have a try at questioning the man that called us on this, Terry," he said, "while we go and give the house the once-over."

The door still swung ajar, as Jackson had found it earlier

in the morning. Oleson and Hames at once advanced to the body which lay, straight and still, on the marble bench beneath the wooden carving and the white figure of Joan of Arc. But for the moment Peter contented himself with standing just inside the doorway, peering about him with his bright, near-sighted eyes. Presently he stepped across the room and stooped over the small chest of carved wood which stood in one corner.

The staple of the padlock which fastened the lid in place had been torn from the wood. Peter lifted the lid gingerly by the corners and opened the chest. It was by no means full, and so far as Peter's rapidly exploring fingers could make out, its contents consisted of bank books, check stubs, and receipted bills. Peter leafed through them quickly and tossed them back. Only one of the bank books merited his closer attention. He held it close to his thick-lensed glasses; then, fishing a sheet of copy paper and a stub of pencil from his bulging coat pocket, made a brief notation before returning it with the rest.

As he turned to join the two men whose bent backs as they leaned over the marble bench concealed its burden from his view, his toe struck a small obstruction on the bare floor. With frowning abstraction, he stooped and picked it up, staring down at it with eyes that scarcely noted what he held. It was a twig of wood, obviously a small branch from one of the trees outside; but the bark had been cut off, leaving a smooth yellow-white stick, faintly marked with the scars of the knife which had whittled it. Peter absent-mindedly thrust the stick into his pocket and ambled across the room.

"The body's stiff. Killed some time during the night," Oleson greeted Peter over his shoulder gruffly. But though his tone was anything but cordial, he stepped to one side, making room for the reporter at the side of the bench. "There's something mighty funny about this," he added.

"You're so damn smart, take a good look and see what you make of it."

From Oleson's heavily sarcastic accents one might have supposed that his opinion of Peter was of the lowest. As a matter of fact, Peter and the policeman were staunch friends, and understood each other very well. The *Herald* reporter had been assigned to more than one crime story, and Oleson, in allowing Peter to accompany him to the house, had not forgotten Peter's habit of turning up helpful suggestions. And although the reporter seemed to regard crime as existing for the purpose of enabling the *Herald* to beat the opposition papers, he had always given the authorities full credit for action undertaken in response to his "tips."

"There isn't any weapon in the room," Peter remarked. "But of course you'll want to look for yourself. Suppose you do. You bother me, staring over my shoulder like that."

With a sound that could only be described as a snort, Oleson obediently turned his back.

"Mind you don't go messing things up," he growled.

"I wasn't born yesterday," Peter retorted with his most disrespectful grin.

His face, however, resumed its intent gravity as he bent over the supine figure of the dead woman. The copy paper and the stub of pencil were again exhumed from his pocket.

"Funny thing to tie a woman up with," he remarked to Hames, who stood at the foot of the bench, a thin bundle of papers in his hands. "A silk bathrobe cord, green and red mixed. We'll look, of course, but something tells me that Luna would never in the wide world wear a green and red bathrobe. If it isn't hers, it'll be worth looking into."

"But look here, Peter!" Willie exclaimed. "I've got——"

"You just hold your horses a shake," Peter admonished.

He carefully parted the thin black draperies over the dead woman's chest and as carefully replaced them.

"I say!" he said musingly. "Of course Oleson got the two wounds, one with a knife and one from some kind of a gun—not close enough for powder marks, though. Both of them mighty near the heart. But do you know whether he noticed that the murderer stabbed her first, and then laid her out like this with her hands crossed so the finger tips almost reach the shoulder, and then shot her afterwards?"

"I'll bite. I just love to play Doc Watson," Hames said ironically.

"Of course it doesn't look so damned important, but still it happened." Peter held up one of the loose angel sleeves of black gauze for Willie's inspection. It was pierced by a round hole, surrounded by a stiffened area of dried blood. "You see, with her arms crossed like that, the bullet went through that bit of sleeve. But the knife wound was under the sleeve too, and yet there isn't any slash from a knife there."

"He probably bound her up and stabbed her, and then added the shot to make sure of the job."

"Very likely," Peter agreed. "But that shot was a great mistake. You can't identify knife wounds but you can identify bullets."

"Provided you find the gun," Willie added skeptically.

"That's right—take the joy out of life. Hullo, here's a print of some sort!" Peter had stooped over, examining the edge of the bench with his near-sighted eyes only a few inches from the surface.

"Yes, Oleson got that, but it's no good. Just the palm and a few smudges. He'll photograph it, of course, but you can't make anything out of it, he's sure."

"Nobody leaves nice fingerprints on the scene of a crime any more," Peter said plaintively. "Still there's this much about it—it was made with the right hand. You can see the roundish smudge at the base of the thumb. He was leaning over the bench supporting himself on his right hand. And

that means that, dollars to doughnuts, the autopsy surgeon will find that the knife thrust was a left-handed blow."

"Yes, and I suppose there are some hundreds of thousands of left-handed people in the world," Willie remarked. "If that's all there is to go on——"

"It won't be, darling," Peter countered severely, "but every little bit helps. I don't say I count much on the print, but at least it exists. The funniest thing to me isn't what's here, but what isn't here. Queer as it looks, this black-robe affair is what Luna regarded as a regular costume. And she hasn't any shoes on. They weren't kicked off in a struggle, because they're not in this room."

CHAPTER IV

"Coming, boys?"

The two men turned at the summoning voice of Oleson, who stood in the doorway of the inner room through which Luna had entered to greet Peter the day before. They followed him into a small neat bedroom, from which two other doors, standing ajar, showed glimpses of a bath and kitchenette beyond. Oleson began a systematic search of the closet, evidently in quest of the missing bathrobe, but Peter, after a brief survey of the shoe bag attached to the closet door, wandered aimlessly about the room for a few minutes and finally stood fidgeting with the toilet articles on the dressing table.

Oleson emerged from the closet shaking his head. The reporters stepped out of his way as he continued his investigation of the bedroom and then disappeared briefly into the bathroom and kitchenette. He shook his head again as he rejoined them.

"Absolutely nothing here, boys," he announced.

"Well, here's one thing you might like." Peter swung himself down from the dressing table on which he had perched during Oleson's absence. In his hand was a perfume atomizer, and he made a gesture of pressing the bulb, pointing the spray in the direction of the policeman.

"Here, quit your fooling!" Oleson hastily protested. "Do you think I want to go back to the Hall smelling like a blooming flower garden?"

"You wouldn't," Peter said mildly. "This here little atomizer doesn't squirt smells. Watch!"

This time the policeman did not dodge as Peter pressed the bulb.

"You see? It's a disguised hypodermic needle that comes out of the spout. When you get the stuff in the bottle analyzed you'll find it's a good strong solution of morphine. I unscrewed the top while you were out and tasted it," Peter said calmly.

"The hell you did! You'll taste one little thing too often, one of these days, my lad. Curiosity killed a cat, you know. How did you know it wasn't cyanide or something?"

"Well, it wasn't," Peter answered incontrovertibly. He handed the atomizer to Oleson. "A little present, with love from Peter," he said, grinning.

"Thanks. Do you know anything else?"

"A little," Peter admitted modestly. "I happened to call on this Luna person yesterday——"

"The hell you did!" Oleson exclaimed for the second time. "What's the game up here, anyhow?"

"Well, it's a kind of voodoo colony," Peter explained, resuming his position with dangling feet on the edge of the dressing table. "A flock of nit-wits gave all their good hard money to Luna because they believed she was a witch and in league with the devil. One of them got bilked out of twenty thousand the other day, and was pretty sore. Name of Lewis Tanner. That's how I happened to come out. You can get the details from Bert Graham. You'll probably want to look into Tanner a bit—his wife's one of the colonists."

"Thanks. I will." Oleson drew a black leather-bound notebook from his pocket and entered the name.

"One of those bank books in the chest in the other room is a joint account in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Anthony."

"I noticed that," Oleson nodded. "Think the Anthony guy's her husband?"

"Probably," Peter agreed. "Though there isn't any hus-

band in the immediate picture. Maybe she posed as his wife at some time or other. There's more than one gentleman in the lady's past, if I'm any character reader."

Oleson nodded again.

"The way it dopes out——" he began.

"Wait a shake," Peter interrupted. "There are two other things we don't want to forget. One of them is, that Luna wasn't a dope user."

"She wasn't? Then why——"

"I don't know why, but I know she wasn't. There aren't any puncture marks on her arms, for one thing. That doesn't count for so much, because she might have used it on her leg or somewhere else. But I saw her yesterday, and I've seen enough dope addicts, at one time or another, to spot them. She was a queer one all right, but she wasn't any hop head."

"Then I don't see——"

"Oh, the little perfume-dope machine will have to fit in somewhere," Peter said impatiently. "You can't expect to tick it all off on your fingers in an hour. That doesn't bother me half as much as something else."

"What?" Oleson prodded, as Peter lapsed into frowning and silent reflection.

"That woman was killed in the same dress she wore when she talked to me yesterday afternoon. She had on shoes then, of course—black sort of sandal affairs, the kind of thing you'd expect with that ultra-art get-up. But she hasn't any shoes on now. And what's more, the shoes she was wearing are simply not anywhere in this house."

Oleson refused to be unduly impressed by Peter's earnestness.

"There's just one thing wrong with you, Peter," he said with paternal severity. "You want a good story for your paper more than anything else on earth. This one's quite good enough for your precious front page as it stands, but

you have to go and try to make it better. We're not going to overlook anything. We'll look into the dope angle, and find out about this Merrill Anthony that has the bank book, and of course we'll question everybody in this here crank colony and get Tanner to give an account of himself. But it looks to me like this crime isn't going to stay unsolved very long. Did Hames show you the letters?"

"He didn't give me a chance!" Hames expostulated, appearing in the doorway of the outer room, to which he had retreated during Peter's conversation with Oleson. "I've just finished copying them. Jimmy just does love having letters to print."

"What about them?" Peter asked. "Where are they?"

"They were laid in a neat pile on top of her crossed hands," Willie answered. "They're love letters, and every one of them's signed either 'Earl' or 'Earl Vincent.' He's begging her to quit this racket, whatever it is, and marry him. Evidently she was holding off, for the last ones sound pretty desperate. He was bemoaning his lack of money, and at the same time saying he couldn't live without her. Then, apparently in answer to something she's told or written him, he refers here in this one to 'another obstacle'—says no obstacle would stand in her way if she really loved him, and that nothing, 'not life nor death nor any other creature' —he's quoting the Bible there—would be allowed to stand in his way or in the way of his love for her."

"And there you have it," Oleson broke in. "Suppose she was already married to this Anthony, or suppose she just didn't fancy giving up an easy thing with these suckers she was taking in, and descending to love in a cottage. This Vincent guy, who wasn't going to let anything stand in his way, came up here to argue, got mad and bumped her off. A plain straight love murder, by all the signs."

"Hm—m," Peter nodded, but his *hum* of assent ended on a rising inflection. "He'd have to be in a state of mind in

which, after he'd killed her, he didn't care whether he was caught or not. If he loved her, and was stricken by remorse, he might have crossed her arms over her breast and laid his letters there. Given a certain dramatic temperament, that's quite plausible. Still, it doesn't account for several things—the shoes, for instance."

"There may be any number of funny things around that don't play a part in the actual killing," Oleson said defensively. "You've got to remember that this is a more or less cracked bunch around here—probably including the woman herself."

"I take it you didn't find the bathrobe?" Peter inquired.

"Not there," Oleson laconically announced.

"It wouldn't be. That is, it wouldn't be hers. But I don't quite see Earl Vincent, whatever his state of mind, traveling about the country in a red and green bathrobe."

"Well, I'm not jumping to any conclusions," Oleson said. "I don't even say for sure that Vincent did it. But I do say that we're going to get hold of him mighty quick, and that if he does happen to have a red and green bathrobe, and most particularly if he happens to have a gun that fits the bullet the autopsy surgeon takes out of the body, he'll have to do a lot of explaining or find himself booked on a murder charge."

"I don't believe you'll find that the bathrobe fits Earl Vincent," Peter said reflectively. "If he lived here in the colony he wouldn't have had to write letters to her. Anyway, the letters don't sound as if he had met her through her pretensions to witchcraft—he seemed down on that whole business. And he certainly didn't go around town in any such garb as that."

"Well, if it isn't hers and isn't his——"

"Then, if you'll excuse the aspersion on the dead, it might very likely belong to one of quite a number of other people. Remember, Oleson, I have one advantage over you—I saw

her when she was alive. That woman had more love affairs than you can shake a stick at. She couldn't help it any more than a flower can help blooming. It's in the type."

"You think it might have been jealousy then—somebody else who was jealous of Vincent?"

"You might hold your mind open to the thought, anyway—that is, of course, unless you get some corroborative evidence pointing to Vincent."

"You bet," Oleson agreed. "I'm not putting all the eggs in one basket. I'll keep all these nut colonists right here where I can get at 'em later. But anyway you look at it, the first thing to do is to get after Vincent. We'll take one look around outside, to see if we can pick up any of that corroborative evidence you're so keen on, and then we'll go after him."

As the three men stepped out of the front door, the second of the two policemen approached them on the path.

"Hullo, Terry," Peter nodded in greeting. "You know Willie Hames, of course."

"Couldn't escape it." Terry's broad Irish face expanded in a friendly smile. "There's no getting anything out of the old man, Inspector," he said, turning to Oleson. "He's as mum as a clam. Anyway, he's blind—*and* dumb. He went to bed early, slept through the night, and didn't hear any noises. He may come through with more later, but I doubt it."

"Well, we'll keep an eye on him anyway, though in all probability he doesn't know a darn thing about anything, including the murder," Oleson remarked over his shoulder. He had already turned away from the group to make a slow circuit of the exterior of the cottage. A moment later Peter heard his thudding footfalls come to an abrupt halt out of sight around the corner.

"Found anything?" he called, and without waiting for an answer followed in the direction Oleson had taken.

He found the policeman half stooping, his hands planted on his knees, before the open window of the main room of the bungalow.

"Somebody was standing out here," he said.

Peter peered over the policeman's shoulder.

"Yes," he agreed, "but why couldn't they leave decent, clear footprints that you could take measurements of and fit to somebody's feet!"

The marks, indeed, were mere formless depressions.

"No such luck," Oleson said resignedly. Carefully avoiding the shapeless footmarks, he leaned forward and pointed a stubby forefinger at the window sill.

"See that?" he asked.

Peter, balancing with one hand on Oleson's shoulder, bent over the sill.

"That's a fresh scratch on the wood," Oleson pointed out. "Judging from the distance to the footprints, I wouldn't be surprised if the bullet in the body turned out to be a rifle bullet. He stood here, see, and rested the barrel of the gun on the window sill. It's right in line with the body, and the left side is toward the window—you can see that from here."

"So it is," Peter said thoughtfully. "And the scratch is on a line with the left footmark."

"You bet it is!" Oleson's voice for the first time warmed to enthusiasm. "And that smudgy mark on the side of the bench that wasn't good enough for fingerprints was made with the right hand. If Earl Vincent should by any possibility turn out to be left-handed, it's what you might call a bit of corroborative evidence, eh?"

"I'd like to hear what he has to say," Peter begged.

"You will," Oleson promised. "I owe you a little something for this perfume-bulb thing. If I'd overlooked it and the D.A.'s men had picked it up later, I'd have looked rather sick. I'll give you a ring as soon as we get a line on him."

"Thanks. I've got to let the office know I'm alive, or Jimmy will be having apoplexy complicated by homicidal impulses."

Peter fell into step with Terry as they strolled together down the path to the gates.

"Funny case," he remarked. "No end funny. Those shoes——"

"In a way it's funny and in a way it ain't," the Irishman offered sententiously. "I'll tell you what makes it the funniest, or rather, what's just what you might be expecting."

"What's that?" Peter inquired, only half attentive.

"Did you notice what day it is?"

"The seventeenth. Why?"

Terry stopped short on the path and rammed his forefinger against Peter's breast bone for emphasis.

"It's the day before the full moon, that's why!" he said solemnly.

"Maybe it is, but what has that to do with it?" Peter asked in bewilderment.

"It's got a lot to do with it. There's always a crime wave around the full moon—crimes and suicides. Every time."

Peter laughed uncertainly. It didn't seem much of a joke, but it was incredible that the big Irish patrolman actually believed in occult influences of the moon.

"I'm not fooling. I've kept a record for the past seventeen years, and it's an absolute fact."

Peter stared in blank astonishment. For once in his life, he had absolutely nothing to say. Terry was no wan, emotional mystic, recruit for one of the numerous cults of which the Luna Colony was an example. He was a middle-aged, hard-headed policeman. And yet he too had his superstitions. Peter suddenly felt as if the world held a great many more kinds of people than he had hitherto guessed. Oleson had said that the factors in the crime which worried

Peter probably meant nothing intelligible, because Luna and her followers must be half cracked. Well, at this rate, if you happened to discover it, half the world might be hiding some hidden belief in witchcraft and occult powers.

There was a psychopathic element in the murder—of that Peter had felt certain, although he had forborne to use the word to Oleson. Oleson regarded any mention of the psychopathic as a device of defense lawyers to keep criminals out of the Big House. The crossed arms, the love letters above them—they were out of the ordinary, even in a crime of passion, and in addition, one must suppose that the murderer had left the house, looked through the window from outside, and shot his victim after stabbing her. Perhaps she had not been quite dead—she might have stirred, and he had fired to make death assured, or to put her out of misery.

It was the work of a mind, not deranged perhaps, but certainly not working with cool normality. It had seemed to narrow the field at least partially. But if even policemen were going to take moon magic seriously, there was no telling what might turn up. Instead of being a more or less recognizable psychopath, the murderer of Luna might as likely as not be the traffic cop at the corner!

CHAPTER V

PETER's desire to hear what Vincent had to say was doomed to disappointment, though through no fault of the police. For Vincent had disappeared; and the circumstances of his departure were such as to bring his name to the front page of the *Herald* under the banner line, "Witch Murder Suspect Sought." Oleson, indeed, relaxed from the more serious aspect of the state-wide hunt long enough to ask Peter, with a pardonable air of I-told-you-so: "What price corroboration now?"

Vincent had been traced without difficulty to one of the new apartments on Alvarado Avenue—the nearest practicable abode to the side road leading to the Luna Colony. So far the trail was wide and clear. Although he had moved there recently, he had filed his address with the post office under his own name, and his card was affixed to one of the row of mail boxes in the outer vestibule. But Vincent himself was not to be found.

Oleson's visit to the apartment house, however, was by no means devoid of items of interest. For one thing, he found a framed photograph of Luna occupying a position of state on the top of the bureau. For another, a tenant had heard hastily ascending footsteps sometime during the night of the murder—just when, she was unable to say—and had been sufficiently curious to open her door and peer out into the hall. She had caught a glimpse of a back which she was sure was Vincent's, and, a scant five minutes later, had popped back under cover just in time to avoid being seen by Vincent, who was bounding down the stairs three at a time, a

suitcase in his hand. The same witness, an elderly widow who lived alone, with few interests beyond those afforded by observing her neighbors, had several times encountered Vincent at the outer entrance, and recalled distinctly that he inserted his key with his left hand.

Oleson fairly beamed at this last bit of information.

"Still," Peter objected, "it's funny he'd be making a getaway after murdering the woman, and then leave her picture in plain sight to link him with it. And you'd think he'd have come upstairs quietly, instead of making all that racket."

"He was rattled. He hadn't set out with the intention of killing her, and he lost his head. You never can tell what fool things people will do when they're rattled," Oleson expounded.

Peter was obliged to admit the logic of Oleson's contention. It was, he had to confess, precisely because Vincent's reactions had followed no normal line, supposing that he had struck in passion and then fled in terror, that some corner of Peter's mind remained unconvinced. Everything seemed accounted for—except the persistent element of queerness in the crime: the hypodermic so cleverly concealed, which Luna did not use; the missing shoes; the strange circuit of the house, the look through the window, followed by the rifle shot. But when he remembered the policeman Terry's excursion into lunar criminology, he was forced to assume a possible underlying queerness in the most unexpected quarters. Peter's confidence in his own mastery of psychology, in fact, had sustained a disconcerting blow.

A certain latent and irrational skepticism, however, was vanquished by the irrefutable findings of common sense in the two days that followed the discovery of Earl Vincent's disappearance. The young man's father, promptly unearthed by the police in the mysterious hidden catacombs of a downtown hotel where he had functioned as an invisible minor

employee for fourteen years, gave a disquieting account of his son's actions. He was obviously too bewildered and terrified to tell anything but the truth.

Peter, who had the idea of supplementing the questions of the police with some inquiries of his own, found him horrified, grief-stricken, and incredulous. He had the air of a man jerked out of a familiar twilight routine, whose every turn he could have traversed blindfold, into a world of chaos where the very ground under his feet had been hurled asunder by earthquake. He blinked at Peter with a blind helplessness of pain, smoothing his thin gray hair with trembling fingers, again and again returning to a single reiterated refrain:

"I don't see how he could 'a' done it. I'd never 'a' thought it of Earl."

He lacked the perspicacity to guess the trend of Peter's questions which ranged beyond the police interrogation. Obviously it had not occurred to him to seek a possible insanity defense for his son.

No, Earl had never had explosions of rage. He wasn't moody or peculiar in any way. He made friends readily, and kept them—a perfectly ordinary, likable boy, until "that woman" (a brief spark of antagonism lighted the watery old eyes) got hold of him. He'd been going with a nice girl, and they all thought that marriage would be just a matter of time, when he met this Luna on the boat where he was radio operator.

"He just lost his head over her completely," Vincent said. "I told him she was out of his class—used to more money in a week that he could ever make in a year. She was only playing with him—anybody could see that who wasn't blind. But you couldn't tell him anything. He acted plum bewitched." There was no mistaking the old man's bitterness, and his belief in the malign and potent influence which Luna had exercised over his son's life.

"She was older than him, too. She shouldn't of acted like that with a boy that was just a kid at heart. I tell you, if Earl's went wrong, it's that woman's fault and she got what was coming to her!" He smote his thin knee with a trembling fist. "He gave up his job on the boat because he saw he'd never save up enough that way to get her, and he wanted to be in town all the time, where she was. Earl's a steady boy, but he'd never in the wide world make what that woman would call money. I've been worried about him lately—scared he might be getting into bad company." Vincent's voice wavered into silence.

As to the precise nature of the bad company, Peter could get nothing more out of him. Once or twice secretive young men had met Earl at his father's house by appointment and had been closeted with him on business which the boy refused to divulge. They had parked their car around the corner in the alley and had looked swiftly and cautiously up and down the street before leaving the house.

"It was after he found out she was already married that I got worried for fear he was going wrong," the old man reverted to his grievance against Luna.

"To whom was she married?" Peter asked quickly.

"I never heard the last name—Earl called him Anthony. Maybe she just said that to try to get rid of him. But Earl had the idea that if he only had the money, he could persuade her to get a divorce and marry him."

Peter's lips puckered in a silent whistle. Anthony—Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Anthony had been the name on the joint checking account.

"And the girl—the girl he used to have—what's become of her?" he asked with elaborate casualness. Jealousy worked both ways. Earl Vincent, jealous of the husband, jealous perhaps of other rivals as well, caught in the toils of hopeless infatuation and desperate because he lacked the money to buy fulfillment of his dreams. It was a reasonable

picture. But the other girl who had been in love with him and was forced to give him up not only to a rival, but to a rival whose predominant influence was evil, disintegrating the character of the man she loved—that picture also might repay closer inspection.

"She's a nice girl, Ruth Morgan, and she was mighty fond of Earl. She's had a lot to stand from my boy, first and last. A good, capable girl, with a nice position, secretary in a lawyer's office. She and Earl could have got along fine. Plenty of spunk, too! But it wore on her, you could tell that, all the more as she's got pride and kept a stiff upper lip. She quit her job last week. Said she was going off for a vacation all by herself. I don't know but it was the best thing she could 'a' done."

"Where did she go, do you know?" Peter with difficulty suppressed the eagerness in his voice.

"No, I don't. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you," the old man responded with sudden heat. "She's been through enough. Don't you go and try to drag her into this. She's a good girl, I tell you!" And with that, Peter for the time being was forced to be content.

"If he done it, he ought to be punished, I know that," Vincent said miserably. "It's just that I can't quite figure my boy doing a thing like that, and running away. You put it in the paper that I want he should come home. I haven't much, he knows that, but say I'll stand by him, no matter what he done. He's my boy, after all. I don't want him to run away from what he done, and I'll help him all I can. Will you put that in?"

Peter nodded. There was nothing he could offer in the way of encouragement, but his sympathy for the old man was genuine. There might, just conceivably, be some other explanation of Earl Vincent's flight, but it looked more than suspicious. Even Peter's habitual skepticism was not proof against the obvious deductions of common sense. Ten to

one, Vincent was guilty, and he had riveted the assumption of his guilt into something near certitude by his disappearance. His own acts had outrun the need of further proof.

The picture drawn by Earl's father of an ordinary, normal youth caught in the web of an overmastering infatuation appealed to Peter's pity, despite his growing belief in Vincent's guilt. He would not be clever enough to get away with it, that was certain! Peter was scarcely surprised to learn, when he returned to the office after his interview with the missing man's father, that trace of the fugitive had been found. He had just settled down to his typewriter when Jimmy dashed across the room, flourishing a yellow typewritten sheet of paper.

"New lead on Vincent! The A.P. just sent in a flash. His car was found overturned in a ditch just outside Los Angeles. No sign of Vincent himself, but the registration card is in his name and the license plates tally. There was a rifle in the back seat. Check with the district attorney's office and see what Graham's going to do. The autopsy report came in while you were out and the bullet has been turned over to Graham. Oh, by the way, the autopsy surgeon says the knife wound was inflicted by a left-handed blow, judging by the direction. Better play that up somewhere near the lead."

"Gee!" Peter breathed, "it'll sure put the finishing touches on it if the rifle and the bullet match. That would just about cook Vincent's goose."

"If they find him," Jimmy amended.

"Well, if he's dumb enough to leave all that evidence lying around behind him, he's not likely to escape. It isn't as if he were a professional crook, with places to hide out and all that. It's not so easy to disappear when you haven't had any practice. With the police of the whole state on the lookout for him, he hasn't a chance."

Vincent, however, despite lack of previous training, seemed to have vanished from the abandoned machine as

completely as he had disappeared from his apartment. Almost every hour brought reports that he had been seen, followed by retractions when the suspected persons proved that they were inoffensive citizens, indignant, bewildered, or amused at finding themselves questioned by the police because some highly imaginative stranger had detected a fancied resemblance to the missing man. In one respect the fact that Vincent was not a professional criminal reacted to his advantage. His photograph was not on file in the bureau of criminal identification, and the police were therefore forced to rely on the vagueness of a written description.

On the morning following the discovery of the car, Graham had flown to Los Angeles, taking the bullet with him, in order to get the rifle and to present gun and bullet to a ballistic expert for miscroscopic comparison. As he put in a long-distance call from the office telephone for the district attorney the next evening, Peter admitted to himself that personal curiosity more than professional zeal was responsible for his generosity with *Herald* funds.

If the bullet and the rifle checked, then the last lingering wisp of doubt of Vincent's guilt would perforce be driven from his mind. If they didn't—then Vincent's disappearance, whatever its cause, became a minor mystery of its own. So far as the murder was concerned, they would be just where they were on Tuesday morning, when the body was discovered. Peter wished the police no ill luck; but in the hue and cry after Vincent everything else had been left out of their calculations—things which persistently pricked Peter's curiosity and which he had no time to consider further, so long as he was kept at his desk, hammering out new leads with each new suspect picked up and released in the southern city.

"Any luck?" he asked in response to Graham's "hello" over the wire.

"Enough to pin a murder charge on Vincent—when we get him," Graham answered.

"You're evading," Peter challenged. "If you'd got an identification of that gun and bullet you'd be saying so right out. What's the catch in it?"

"Well," Graham said cautiously, "you may say if you like that the bullet came from the same type and make of gun, and one in the same condition as the rifle found in the car. That ought to be enough, eh?"

"For publication, yes. But there's a nigger in the woodpile somewhere. You don't sound half as chipper as you ought to. You might as well tell me what it is—I won't print it without your say-so."

"I'm morally satisfied it's the same gun all right," Graham insisted, "but the markings weren't clear enough to make an absolute identification possible. It's a cheap make of gun, and old besides. That makes a difference. The rifling is too badly worn to leave a clear impression on the bullet—not clear enough for absolute scientific proof, that is. But the probability, combined with all the other elements in the case, is strong enough for anybody."

Almost strong enough, Peter amended, as he hung up the receiver. Strong enough for a murder charge, strong enough even, it might be, for a conviction. Little weight, surely, could be given a father's belief, against the reluctant acknowledgment of reason, that his son could not have committed murder because he was not that kind of boy. Peter shrugged his shoulders and gave himself over to the day-by-day chronicling of the manhunt for the readers of the *Herald*.

Yet the problem of Earl Vincent's personality continued to nag his mind with an undertone of speculation. Why should it worry him that he could not form a coherent picture of the character of a man whom he had never seen? But that eminently sensible question was persistently followed by an-

other. If Vincent was so stupid or so benumbed by terror as to leave a trail behind him as unmistakable as an automobile highway; if he had not even had the elementary cunning to remove Luna's picture from his room, conceal his driver's license, and dispose of the rifle—how then had he been clever enough to bring that trail to an abrupt end, disappearing as effectively as if he had indeed ridden away on a witch's broomstick?

CHAPTER VI

PETER sat very much at ease, his chair cocked backward, his long legs elevated to the top of his desk, his face hidden behind a book purloined from the literary editor. Now and then he glanced backward over his shoulder at the clock on the office wall. In five minutes he would stroll over to Jimmy's desk, remark that he was "cleaned up" for the day, and suggest that the *Herald* might be expected to survive if he left half an hour early. Those five minutes marked the precise psychological interval between a possible eleventh-hour inspiration for a story on Jimmy's part and a resigned, "All right, go along."

Peter allowed his thoughts to float forward, envisioning a gay and intimate evening of celebration, strictly limited to two. It was his wedding anniversary—his and Barbara's. Two years and no regrets—they'd hold the long-distance matrimonial record yet!

"Mind you don't mix the cocktails before I come," he had warned her. Barbara thought a cocktail was something that existed to put green olives in, but Peter rather fancied himself as a creative expert. They would drink a toast, half merry, half earnest, across the table, with the candles lifting pointed flames between them. Barbara would insist on the candles as indispensable to a real celebration, and Peter, as always, would make gentle fun of her romanticism.

The anniversary would make up for Christmas. Peter had spent Christmas day in the county jail, waiting for the sheriff to bring in a trio of captured bank bandits, while Barbara's carefully prepared dinner had dried itself to shreds in the oven, and she had not even allowed the faintest

trace of disappointment to tinge her voice over the telephone. Staunch little comrade, Barbara! He fingered the small flat box in his waistcoat pocket. She'd scold him for that budget-wrecking little box—but her eyes would be big and shining, and they would agree that the folly of happiness was worth all the calculated wisdom in the world.

The hands of the clock pointed precisely to the half hour as Peter bumped his chair to the floor and ambled with elaborate unconcern to Jimmy's desk.

"I say, Jimmy," he began in his most wheedling tones.

Jimmy slammed the telephone receiver on the hook as Peter approached.

"Piper! Oh, there you are. Get the next boat to San Francisco. Vincent's been found."

"The hell he has!" Peter's voice was studiously colorless. The vision of a candle-lit table, of shining wide eyes, held for a moment, a bright bubble of lost enchantment, then wavered and broke. "The hell he has!" he repeated; but this time his chin was lifted and his eyes were alert and eager. "How come?"

"A passenger on the boat recognized him, and told the captain. He radioed the police. He's on the *Admiral Grayson,* coming up from Los Angeles."

"That's a funny thing," Peter mused. "That's the same boat he traveled on as radio operator a year or so ago. His father mentioned it when we were getting the boy's life history, after he skipped from here. A pretty bold stroke, to come back here at all—and on that boat."

"He got a ticket under an assumed name," Jimmy explained. "Evidently the present radio operator knew who he was. He stuck pretty close in the radio room most of the time. Of course it was just chance that a man who travels back and forth on that line on business caught a glimpse of him and remembered him from the time Vincent was radio operator. Anyhow, he's on his way now. The police sent

back word to keep him under guard, but he couldn't very well get out and walk home across a strip of Pacific Ocean. They're not taking any chances, though. When Vincent found the jig was up he sent a radio message to his father to meet him at the boat with a lawyer."

Peter's face fell.

"That's too bad," he said mournfully. "Ten to one the lawyer will yell to him not to talk before he even gets down the gangplank."

"Just so." With one eye screwed up in a prodigious wink, Jimmy looked very much like a red-haired Mephistopheles. "That's why we're going to get the jump on him. They're sending a police tug out to meet the boat beyond the heads. You just be Johnny-on-the-spot and hop along over the rail. It'll give you a good hour before anybody else from outside gets a sniff at him."

"I do just love bounding about the bay on a good windy night in a tug about the size of a dinner plate. By the time my limp form is shoved on board the *Grayson,* I most likely won't be in a state to sniff at anything, even Vincent." Although Peter's tone was one of extreme dudgeon, Jimmy was not deceived. He was perfectly aware that nothing short of physical abduction would have sufficed to keep Peter away from the chance at an interview with Earl Vincent.

One would have supposed, in fact, from his greeting to the policeman in charge of the harbor patrol an hour later, that Peter asked no better joy in life than to bounce over the waves in a diminutive tug.

"When are you going to start off to meet the *Admiral Grayson?* You may not know it yet, but you're taking me along as a passenger," Peter announced.

"Nothing doing." The policeman met Peter's enthusiasm with a dour conciseness.

Peter's lank figure straightened, and the friendliness in his gray eyes hardened to a cool and indomitable stare.

"Oh, yes, there is, buddy," he said. "I'm Peter Piper of the *Herald,* and if you'll just ring up your chief, you'll find it's all fixed for me to go along."

"Nothing doing," the patrolman repeated laconically. "Nothing's fixed for nobody. We're not going to take the tug out." A slow grin overspread his stolid features as he savored the dramatic effect of his announcement.

"But—why not?" Peter stammered. It flashed wildly across his mind that this must be another case of mistaken identity—that Vincent was not on board after all.

"Because the captain says he won't stop the boat and let us on, that's why. It costs a lot of money to stop a boat, and he radioed back that the police would have to wait till she docks."

"For the love of Mike!" Peter exclaimed. "Do you mean to say the captain can just calmly refuse to let the police on board?"

"Nothing short of the federal government can stop him. When he's on his own vessel, the captain's the law and the whole works. The only thing you can do is to go down to the pier and meet her when she lands."

This Peter proceeded to do. He had lost the coveted chance to be the first to interview Vincent, but that was just the luck of the game, he reflected philosophically as he perched on top of a packing case and listened to the rumble of loaded hand trucks across the wooden planking of the warehouse floor. But why the dickens had the captain refused to allow the police tug to meet the boat outside? Here he was, with the best-advertised murderer in years, and he refused to be bothered to stop the ship. Funny. Maybe ship captains lost their sense of proportion—by which, Peter admitted, smiling to himself, he really meant their sense of publicity.

Gradually the roofed enclosure, to which the warfare of flaring light and black shadow had given an air of vastness,

filled with a gathering crowd. Peter caught a glimpse of the elder Vincent, white and strained, standing beside a middle-aged figure which Peter recognized as the lawyer requested by Earl. Chattering groups, unconscious of the drama of the occasion, thickened, coagulated into a solid mass like drops of water flowing into a stream. A row of newspaper camera men set up their tripods in a line facing the slip. Peter swung his legs from the packing case, waved to Andrews, the *Herald* photographer, and fought his way through the crowd to the clump of reporters gathered at the pier's edge as the boat swung into the dock.

The reporters thrust themselves forward in wedge formation as the gangplank was lowered. Peter, in the front rank, ran head on into the adamantine front of a uniformed policeman guarding the approach.

"Press!" a dozen voices shouted the "open sesame."

"You gotta wait—wait till they bring him out."

Peter recognized the form of Graham, silhouetted against the light, running up the incline. The reporters, in an indistinguishable mêlée, battled the immovable police guards with furious argument. One of them ducked under a lifted arm, dashed halfway up the gangplank, and was ignominiously collared and returned to his fellows. Peter was dimly aware of vague white blobs of faces leaning over the ship's railing, bewildered by the commotion beneath them.

Suddenly the figure of Graham reappeared at the head of the gangplank. Something in his attitude struck the scrambling reporters to abrupt silence. His voice rose above the confused turmoil in a startled shout.

"He's gone! Watch the sides!"

"Earl! My boy!" Peter heard the thin high voice lifted in anguish from somewhere behind him.

The next moment he had crashed through the barrier of astonished police and was scrambling up the gangway, the other reporters tumbling pell-mell in his wake.

CHAPTER VII

"We've got to get the passengers off as quickly as possible. You boys keep out of the way for a few minutes, will you?" The district attorney's tone was curt, but Graham was deservedly popular with the press. "Just give us a chance." At the hint of appeal in his voice, the camera men, trailing their tripods, propped them against the railing and the reporters obediently huddled at one side of the deck. Graham turned to Inspector Oleson, who stood across the head of the gangplank, blocking all egress from the boat. The policemen had reëstablished their formation, momentarily broken by the rush of the reporters, at the foot. Between the startled crowd of passengers on deck and the milling, incoherently shouting crowd below, the gangway was an empty strip.

"You'd better spare one of your men to hunt a telephone, Inspector," Graham requested. "Ask Captain Parkinson to send out the harbor patrol as quick as he can, to scout around the bay. Get all the reinforcements you can, to rush down here and search the waterfront."

"I've already done that, Mr. Graham," Oleson said quietly. "I sent Terry, as soon as you gave the word he'd escaped. If Captain Parkinson had been allowed to send out the tug to meet her outside the bay——"

"We'll settle with the captain about that later," Graham answered grimly. "This boat's two hours later than our last radio advice from her, too. The captain was absolutely responsible for the custody of this prisoner, and he'll have some explaining to do. However, that can wait."

Oleson cast a swift glance below. Beyond the lighted area,

to left and right, stretched vast and shadowy sheds. In the dimness, piles of packing cases loomed as patches of solid blackness. Farther still, Oleson knew, lay miles of waterfront, broken at intervals by other piers, silent and dark.

"By the time the men can get down here it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack," he said glumly. "And listen to that!" He raised his hand, and as if in answer to the signal, a single deep-throated, melancholy hoot sounded from the water behind them. "The fog horn! That accounts for the boat being late. A nice job the harbor patrol will have, to pick up anything on the bay. Anyway, I told Terry to have the men look sharp for any wet footprints, and of course, if they should run into anybody with wet clothes, they'll run him in."

The worried scowl on Graham's face lifted briefly.

"You're a good man, Oleson. When I get time to submit to a bombardment from these news boys I'll see that they put in a word about your team work."

"Thanks," Oleson responded with awkward pleasure. "It's no time to be fussy about authority. You just say what's what, and I'll try to get it done. And that reminds me. About these reporters—shall we run 'em off?"

"Let them stay. We've got to search this boat, as soon as we get the passengers off. Very likely he's still on board. We're short-handed, and they'll be just as anxious to unearth him as we are. Wait a minute, and I'll fix them."

Graham turned from Oleson and raised his voice as he faced the knot of reporters.

"Look here, boys," he said sternly. "You can stick on just one condition—otherwise you get the bum's rush. We'll be glad of your help in going over the boat. If any of you happens to find Vincent, you can grab the credit for your paper. But you're to bring him at once to either Inspector Oleson or me. There's to be no hiding him away again, to get an exclusive. This is serious business, and it wasn't put

on to give some cock-eyed reporter the chance for a scoop. Understand?"

Peter, standing in the front row of the closely packed group, grinned in appreciation of Graham's perspicacity.

"Ay, ay, sir!" The cry was taken up in a concerted shout by the men behind him.

"Then we'll get busy and let these people off."

Oleson stood at one side of the gangplank and Graham at the other, while the passengers filed, two by two, between them. The women passed unchallenged, but each man was required to remove his hat and submit to scrutiny as he passed by.

"Just like Noah's Ark," Evarts of the *Times* chortled in Peter's ear.

"And not a mother's son of us really knows what Vincent looks like," Peter groaned. "The father's still standing there below—over on the right, against the pillar. I wonder if he'd give himself away if he caught sight of his son."

"Not if he has any sense," Evarts answered.

"They're letting all the women by. What with short hair and all, he might be dressed in women's clothes and slip right through," Donoho of the *Express* suggested.

"Not unless he's a trained female impersonator," Peter objected. "Oleson's keeping a keen eye on the way they walk. Besides, where'd he get the clothes? If he stole them from a woman passenger she'd have let out a squawk by this time."

The line of passengers finally thinned to an end, and a uniformed figure stepped forward. Behind him were a score or more of men in white, with small round caps perched at various angles on the backs of their heads.

"I am the first officer," he said. "And these are the crew. I can vouch for them. They were not even informed that a prisoner was on board."

Graham lifted weary eyes.

"All right, let 'em go," he said.

The crew tumbled down the gangplank in mass formation, but the officer lingered a moment.

"The captain asked me to say that he is remaining on board, and will see you at your convenience." Dropping his official tone, he added, "This has been a heavy blow to Captain Marquand. He is—very much upset."

"He'd better be," Graham said sternly.

The first officer stiffened.

"I am sure you will find that Captain Marquand did what he believed to be his full duty. A most unfortunate occurrence—bad for the company."

"The company be damned!" Graham snapped, his rasped nerves finding momentary relief in the explosion. "That's all you seamen think about."

"It is all we need to think about," the officer responded with dignity.

"Hear! Hear!" Peter cheered in a stage whisper, then ducked as Oleson turned a withering gaze upon him.

The clattering footsteps of the crew, followed by the measured tread of the first officer, echoed into silence. The crowd of passengers and their friends had melted away. Even the elder Vincent, his upturned face stricken with fatigue and anxiety, finally allowed himself to be led from the empty pier, supported on the arm of the lawyer.

As the hours wore on, only the brightly lighted ship continued to clatter with life, as policemen and reporters banged open cabin doors and thrust inquiring flashlights under the canvas covering of the shrouded automobiles hunched together in the open spaces fore and aft.

"Where the devil would anybody be most likely to hide on a ship? It seems as if we've looked everywhere—I even caught one of your men peering down a smoke funnel," Peter said as he encountered Oleson in a passageway.

"Everywhere!" Oleson said with massive scorn. "On a

combination freighter and passenger boat like this a man could lie low for a month—provided he had somebody to bring him food. Vincent, remember, knows ships in general and this ship in particular. I don't say he's still here, but he could be, easy enough. It'll take several days to examine the hold. If he isn't picked up outside we'll send men on board to go as far as Portland, at least—provided the precious company will allow it," he added bitterly.

"Well, I feel as if I've done my bit of sleuthing for the night," Peter said, yawning. "It's after three o'clock. I'd like to have a look at Vincent's stateroom, though—it'll be good for a color angle. I notice you've kept the door locked."

"The D.A. locked it as soon as he'd looked in and found that Vincent was gone. He gave me the key. I don't know as there's any reason why you shouldn't go in, though." Oleson hesitated, drawing the key from his pocket and balancing it on the palm of his hand.

"I ran into Graham on his way to the captain's cabin. What he said about the way the police, under the direction of Inspector Oleson, took hold of the situation is going to make a mighty nice play in the *Herald* to-morrow."

"Blarney!" Oleson snorted. But he laid the key in Peter's outstretched hand.

Peter glanced warily up and down the corridor as he approached the door of the room that had been occupied by Vincent. Having satisfied himself that no other reporter was in sight, he unlocked the door, switched on the light, and turned the key in the lock on the inside. Methodically he examined the popular magazines that strewed the floor, and sniffed at the tray of food, almost untouched, that lay across the top of the wash basin. The bed was slightly rumpled, but the covers had not been disarranged. Peter stared for a moment at the empty clothes hooks affixed to the back of the door, then stooped and peered under the low bed.

"No clothes at all. No suitcase," he murmured. "It's a cinch nobody could swim the bay carrying a suitcase. If he was making his getaway from the apartment after the murder, you'd think he'd have taken his clothes with him. But there wasn't any bag found in the car. Now what the devil has he done with it?"

The question, however, remained unanswered. Peter was about to rise from his knees at the side of the bed, when his eyes caught the glimmer of something white just out of reach. Wriggling flat on his stomach, he stretched forward and retrieved a crumpled ball of paper.

"Thrown on the floor, and rolled under. But we'll have a look-see, anyhow," he muttered.

He smoothed the paper on his knee, squinting down at it through his thick glasses.

> I am sorry to do this, but it is the only way [he read]. I hope my father and Captain Marquand will forgive me under the circumstances. Good-bye. EARL VINCENT.

Peter reread the brief sentences several times. A suicide note! So that was what had happened. Vincent had killed himself rather than face capture. But why had he crumpled the note into a ball and thrown it under the bed? Perhaps he had at the last moment decided against leaving a message——

Peter hastily thrust the sheet of paper into his pocket as voices sounded outside the door.

"The light's on—see it under the door? Hey, there, what's up?"

Peter noiselessly turned the key backward in the lock and flung himself on the bed.

"For the love of Mike!" he called out crossly. "Come on in, fellows. You're welcome to all there is, which is nothing. I've had enough of this story for one night. I'd just stretched out to take a little nap."

CHAPTER VIII

"WELL, if anything breaks now, it's all yours," Evarts remarked magnanimously. "You evening-paper guys are lucky. Here we've been fighting like fishwives all night over the one available telephone within half a mile, while you just sit around and soak it all up to write at your leisure."

"Leisure, your eye!" Peter retorted. "You fellows have your story all in and can go to bed. The rest of us have to sit up and write it."

"Anybody buzz the captain?" someone asked.

"Buzz a hornet's nest!" Donoho spoke with feeling. "'Nothing to say.' He's mad as a hatter."

"Well, he's put himself in rather a hole. The razzing he'll get for refusing to let the police send out a tug won't bear thinking of."

"He 'refers us to officials of the company.' What those sea dogs don't know about playing with the press would make a book. He's in for a rough deal."

"I'm going in." Evarts yawned. "Our last edition's been put to bed. It's a cinch nobody'll find anything more tonight."

"I'll see you to the gangplank. I've got to stick around till the first ferry across the bay." Peter seized the opportunity to detach himself from the group that filled Vincent's cabin.

The suicide note was burning a hole in his pocket. The first story of the escape had broken inevitably for the morning papers, but the note would be an exclusive angle of the *Herald's* own. They had promised to take Vincent at once

to Oleson or the district attorney, if they found him, but nothing had been said about notes. Moreover, the conversation preceding Evarts' departure had given him an idea of a way to use the note to possible advantage.

Instead of returning to the cabin after escorting Evarts to the gangplank, he made his way up a narrow flight of stairs —Peter was not sufficiently nautical to think of it as a companionway—to the captain's quarters. His reception, as he had expected, was anything but cordial.

"Who are you and what do you want?" a gruff voice was projected through an inch-wide opening in the door.

"I'm Peter Piper of the *Herald,* and——"

"I can't talk to you. I'm busy." The door was about to bang shut again when Peter thrust Vincent's crumpled note through the aperture.

"I found this, and I brought it straight to you, sir," Peter said meekly. He had a vague idea that captains liked to be addressed with respect, and when out to make a good impression he was all for doing the thing thoroughly. As he had hoped, Captain Marquand automatically opened the door as he reached for the piece of paper, and Peter lost no time in taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him to step inside.

The captain read the note through in silence. A sigh so deep that it was almost a groan was his only comment on its contents. At last he looked up and faced Peter.

"Why didn't you take this to the police?" he said bitterly.

"Because you are the master of the ship. You're the real authority here."

"You wouldn't have thought so if you'd heard the way that man talked," the captain muttered. The conversation between the district attorney and the captain, Peter reflected, must have been a sulphurous one.

"And because," Peter continued, "I believe you've been

placed, most unjustly, in a very difficult position. You had an absolute right to use your own judgment. They're all jumping on you for letting Vincent escape from your custody. I don't know what happened here on board, of course, before he got away. But I believe you had good reason for whatever you did—I believe your judgment was sound. Something altogether unforeseen turned up and proved you were mistaken, and the mistake is likely to cost you pretty dear. You're in for severe criticism, if nothing worse. But I believe it was an honest mistake—so honest that, I somehow think, if the clock could be turned back, you'd do the same thing over again. You look to me like a man who is bitterly sorry, but you don't look like a man who is afraid, and you don't look like a man who is ashamed." Peter's gray eyes were shining with earnestness.

"You're right." The captain sat heavily down on the bed. To Peter's astonishment, the stern eyes were filmed with tears. "You're right," he repeated, "I am sorry. You see—I knew Vincent. It was my fault. I meant it for the best, but it was too much to expect—more than he could stand up under. I didn't realize——" He gazed down, unseeing, at the sheet of paper on his knee.

Peter waited, not daring to speak. He had not the faintest idea what the captain was talking about, but there was no mistaking the pain in the rough voice.

"And so," the captain said heavily, "I sent him to his death."

"Perhaps it was the best thing you could have done—best for him, at least, if he killed Luna." Peter's voice was very gentle.

"You'll never make me think he killed Luna!" The captain lifted his bent head and glared at Peter, as if defying contradiction. His thick fist smote his knee for emphasis. "He wasn't that kind of boy."

Peter started. He had heard those words before—a thin

hand striking a trembling knee, and old Vincent's voice saying, "He ain't that kind of a boy."

"But," he faltered, "he ran away. And now——"

"I don't know what he did, nor why. But he didn't act like a man that's committed murder. You see, I knew him," the captain said for the second time. "Whatever he did was done from bad judgment, maybe, but it wasn't done from guilt. Not even this," he indicated the note in his hand.

"Perhaps we can find out what he really did," Peter hazarded.

"It was bad judgment for him not to come straight to me, the minute he came on board." The shock of the news of Vincent's suicide and Peter's manifest sympathy, following the long strain of the night, had broken Marquand's resistance. He had been too proud for self-defense when he faced the cold scorn of the district attorney and knew that it was deserved, but now, scarcely realizing his own need, he reached for the reassurance of Peter's understanding.

"I didn't know he was on the ship till that man came rushing up and said he'd recognized him. Then, of course, I sent for him at once and told him."

"Told him?" Peter echoed uncomprehendingly.

"Told him he was wanted for murder. He already knew that Luna was dead."

"You mean—he actually said he didn't know they were hunting him?" Peter stared, incredulous.

"I'm positive he didn't know it," the captain answered with simple conviction.

"That doesn't sound reasonable——"

"Earl wasn't reasonable. In some ways he'd never grown up. That was one of the things that made him such a lovable kid." The captain shook his head slowly. "No, Earl could do lots of things that weren't sensible, but he wouldn't commit murder."

"What did he say, when you told him?" Peter asked curi-

ously. More and more he felt an imperative need to make a coherent pattern out of the unknown Vincent's personality.

"I think he hardly grasped it—what it really meant, that is. He was all broken up—but with grief, not fear. He'd seen the paper Tuesday—the one that first told about Luna's death; but he didn't seem to have connected himself with it at all. It hadn't entered his head that he'd be suspected."

"But the whole state was after him—it was all over the front pages!"

"He hadn't looked at a paper since that first one. He was all broken up about it—just sat there where you're sitting now, with his head in his hands, trying to realize that Luna was actually dead."

Peter considered this picture in silence for a moment.

"But," he suddenly objected, "he ran away from his apartment before the papers came out with the story of the murder. He *must* have known!"

"That's right—it looks that way," Captain Marquand admitted. "I didn't think of it at the time. I felt pretty bad myself, you see. I was fond of the boy. Anyway, that's what he said, and I believed him."

"And the false name he was traveling under?" Peter prodded.

"I did ask him about that—name of W. L. Smith, it was."

"It *would* be Smith—if it wasn't Jones. People never do use any imagination about names," Peter jibed.

Captain Marquand ignored the sarcasm.

"He told me he met this man Smith in a coffee shop. Smith had bought a ticket and then had changed his plans. He sold his ticket to Earl."

"Did he know Smith before?" Peter asked.

"No, he just happened to run across him. Of course it's against the rules to transfer a ticket, but it's done all the time."

"It's theoretically possible," Peter conceded. "But when a man who's wanted for murder turns up traveling under an assumed name—well, it's rather a coincidence, to say the least of it. And by the way, it's a mighty strange thing that he'd take this boat at all. Still, it might have been clever to double back on his tracks, leaving his car where it would focus the search on the southern part of the state."

"When you put it that way, it does look bad. But I didn't think so then, and I'm not sure that I think so now. When this stranger Smith mentioned the *Grayson,* I think Earl may have turned to it, sort of blindly, for comfort. He thought of the ship as a friendly place—it had been his home for more than a year, when he was radio operator. He was on the verge of collapse. That's why he hadn't come to me, or any of the other officers he had known. He just stayed in his cabin, brooding."

"Or hiding," Peter amended.

"Have it your own way," the captain said stubbornly. "I'm telling you how it looked to me then. He'd always been such a jolly, likeable chap. I'd been almost as fond of him as if he were my own son. It wasn't easy for me to tell him he was under arrest for murder. It had to be done, but it was a cruel thing to have to say, when he was already half wild with grief."

"How did he take it?" Peter asked.

"He just groaned, with his head in his hands. 'It doesn't matter much,' he said. 'Nothing could be much worse than it is already.' Then he held out his hands, as if he expected me to put the handcuffs on him then and there. His face was all crumpled up, like a little boy that's been hurt and can't understand why."

"And you?"

"I couldn't do it," the captain said simply. "I couldn't do it, any more than I could kick a pup that came and laid its head on my knee. I put him on his word of honor to stay

in his cabin. I told him I'd have to radio the police, of course, but I promised him he shouldn't be bothered till we landed. I kept my word—and by God, I'm glad I kept it!" The captain's eyes flashed sudden fire. "I wasn't going to let them jump on him like a pack of jackals. They'd have plenty of time with him on shore. But they didn't even want to give him that much peace. I told them I was master of this ship, and nothing short of an order from the federal government would make me let them on board until we docked. I may lose my command for it, but, by all that's holy, I'd do it again!"

"And then what happened?"

"I don't know." The captain's voice sank again after his sudden outburst. "The last time anyone saw him, that I know of, was the steward who took him his supper. I was busy on the bridge. The fog had closed in, and we had to feel our way along."

"Did he have his supper before or after the passengers went to the dining saloon?"

"Before. The trays are always taken around before the dinner gong sounds."

"And the ship was going very slowly—say about the time you came through the Gate?"

"Not more than quarter speed ahead, I'd say."

"Hm." Peter assimilated this information in silence. The captain had answered his last questions mechanically, following his own train of thought.

"I meant it kindly, but I shouldn't have done it," he said sadly. "That was my mistake. I should have watched over him—not to guard him, but to look after him. I put him on his word of honor. It was too heavy a burden, on top of all the rest. I forgot he wasn't really grown up. It was too much responsibility to put on him."

"But look here!" Peter argued. "Since he did escape—broke his parole rather than face arrest—it looks more than

ever as if he must have been guilty. He was afraid to see it through."

"Afraid to see it through, if you like," Captain Marquand admitted. "In a way, I suppose it was breaking his parole. But it was a pretty stiff thing to ask of a boy's honor—I see that now. I'm sorry he did it, but I can't feel too hard on him. Escape? Well, I suppose death is the final escape of all. He asks me in this note to forgive him. And I do."

Peter was silent for a long moment. His thoughts fluttered like scattered birds rising from the ground, and then, like birds, arranged themselves by no effort of his own in a straight line across the sky of his mind.

"I don't believe he committed suicide," he said at last. "People don't write suicide notes and then crumple them up and throw them under the bed. I'll have to find out whether he really wrote the note at all. I'm inclined to think he did—that he meant to kill himself when he wrote it, and then changed his mind. Perhaps it was the slow speed of the boat that gave him the idea of getting away. At any rate, I believe that he slipped out to the rail unobserved, watching his chance while the passengers were at dinner. He knew the shore line—knew just where the ship would come closest in shore. I believe he jumped overboard in the fog, and swam to land!"

CHAPTER IX

THE disappearance of Vincent from his apartment on the day following the murder had been the story of the escape, the ensuing pursuit, of a man whom the public accepted without question as a fleeing criminal—a good story, but not unprecedented. The story of Vincent's spectacular vanishing from the ship sold out extra editions as fast as they could be rushed to the street from the presses.

Peter sat at his desk, the headpiece of his telephone clamped permanently over his ears, checking rumors as fast as they came in to the *Herald* office, hammering out new leads, snatching gulps of black coffee from the cup that cooled at his elbow.

A life preserver was missing from the stock of the *Admiral Grayson.* The life preserver had been washed overboard several weeks previously. Vincent had slid down the side of the ship on a rope and had hidden under the piles of the wharf—a passenger had noticed the dangling rope. The passenger, when finally identified, hadn't seen any rope but had thought that might be a clever means of escape. A man in dripping wet clothes had stopped at a cottage and asked for breakfast. The man was sixty years old and had been released from jail where he had been held as a vagrant the day before. Vincent had been recognized by an acquaintance in an automobile on the streets of San Francisco. The acquaintance could not be found. A steward had been seen conveying a mysterious package of food to the inner recesses of the ship. The food was for the ship's cat, a pampered creature for whom the crew had arranged a

luxurious maternity ward. Vincent was hiding on board with the connivance of the captain—the steamship company was going to remove him from his command. The steamship company had nothing to say, except that it had every confidence in Captain Marquand, who had acted entirely within his rights in refusing to stop the vessel to allow the police on board. The body of Vincent had been washed ashore, drowned. The body was that of a man who had been dead at least two weeks.

Peter ripped a sheet of paper from the carriage of the typewriter, marked it "Add Vincent," and laid it on Jimmy's desk.

"I guess that'll hold 'em till to-morrow," he said. "I'd better go out to the old man's house and check the handwriting on that suicide note."

"We ought to have a statement from him for to-morrow's first run, anyhow," Jimmy agreed. Now that the last edition had gone to press, he had time to look at Peter. The reporter's black hair stood up in all directions, where the arc of the telephone headpiece had caught it. There were dark smudges under his eyes, and his skin was sallow with fatigue.

"Have any lunch?" he asked curtly.

"The copy boy brought me a sandwich."

"Any breakfast?"

"Sure. The boy lugged in coffee and a hamburger."

"Any din——"

"My Lord!" Peter's slouching form pulled itself suddenly erect. He lurched back to his desk and seized the telephone, at the same time thrusting his fingers into his waistcoat pocket. The pocket was empty.

"Barbara!"

"Darling, don't shout so. I can hear you." Barbara's voice was sweet and clear as spring water.

"My Lord, I've gone and done it. I've done it now, Bar-

bara, I forgot all about our anniversary. I forgot to let you know. Good God——"

"Some day the telephone company's going to come around and disconnect our service if you swear like that." There was a ripple of laughter in Barbara's serene tones. "Honestly, dear, it's nothing to get excited over. Mr. Sears telephoned me last evening in plenty of time."

"He did? Jimmy remembered to let you know? Well, I'll —be—damned!" He had forgotten—and Jimmy had remembered. Jimmy had thought nothing of yanking him away from his wedding anniversary, but he had thought to tell Barbara so that she should not worry. Peter's voice was very small indeed as he spoke again into the transmitter.

"But, Barbara," he said, "that isn't all. I bought you a present—a fifty-dollar present. I had it in my pocket, and I've lost it. It may be somewhere on that damned boat, or it may be at the bottom of the bay. Anyway it's gone."

There was a moment's tense silence, during which Peter's long face became more and more woebegone. Barbara had overlooked a lot, but there were things no woman could be expected to forgive. That present—it was one thing to make Barbara laugh at the way he had thrown his cap over the windwill in defiance of the budget, and quite another thing to have that budget disrupted with nothing to show for it. And he had forgotten her—forgotten her completely. She would have had the candles all set out on the table—and then it had remained for Jimmy, almost a stranger so far as Barbara was concerned, to show her the consideration her own husband had lacked.

"Peter! Are you there?"

"I'm here," Peter answered miserably.

"Then listen." Barbara's voice was vibrant; and—yes—there was that subtle undercurrent of laughter in it, the tone he loved best of all. "I never thought it was going to be easy to be married to a newspaper man, but I didn't think I'd

live to be married to a newspaper man that groveled. Stop groveling this instant! I think it was sweet of you to get me the present, and I don't care if you did lose it."

"But Barbara, I did forget. There's no use saying I'm sorry——"

"Peter Piper, if you'd thought about a little thing like a wife when a story like this broke, you'd be a bum newspaper man. I don't mind having married a newspaper man, but I'd simply loathe marrying a bum one. I read your story, Peter. I ran down to the corner and grabbed every edition the minute it came out. You've got to find Vincent. If any other paper gets him, I'll simply sit down and howl!"

Fatigue dropped from Peter like a mask stripped from his face as he hung up the receiver. There were fools who said that women lived only for personal emotion and were jealously insulted if a man let his work come first even for a moment. And there was Barbara, not caring that he'd forgotten her, brushing aside the dismal anti-climax of the expensive anniversary present he had bought and lost. He was an addle-pated fizzle as a husband, and Barbara didn't care. But she'd care if he got beaten on the story. Would he find Vincent? At least he'd make one grand stab at finding out what had happened to him, or know the reason why!

For the first time in many days—the first time since Jimmy had given him the news of Luna's death—Peter's exit from the local room was accompanied by the piercing strains of a wailing minor tune.

"Hoo-oo-oo, hu-hu-hu-hoo!" The high, dismal whistle brought protesting hands to the ears of the staff.

"Hell's bells!" Jimmy grunted. "The kid's been going all day and all night, and he's just getting into his stride."

When Peter, still whistling, steered the rattling Bossy to the curb in front of the small frame house where the elder Vincent lived, a man detached himself unobtrusively from

the entrance to a corner grocery on the opposite side of the street.

"Looking for somebody?"

"No, I just came out for a ride," Peter announced gravely. "Watching the house, eh?" He turned back the flap of his coat, displaying his press badge.

"Oh, you're one of those reporters," the plain-clothes man grinned.

"You guessed it the first time, Sherlock. Peter Piper of the *Herald*. Dull job you've got."

"Yeh," the policeman agreed.

"Too bad I didn't put some pep into it by telling you I'd found Vincent and was on my way to break the news to the old man."

"Oh, I knew you were with the press all right. I can spot a reporter as far as I can see him."

"You'll get caught some day. A newspaper man will disguise himself as a criminal, or a criminal will disguise himself as a reporter, and then where will you be?" Peter flung over his shoulder as he mounted the steps.

Vincent himself answered the door. With a wave of pity Peter noted that he had aged visibly. His thin figure seemed to have wizened and shrunk under the weight of shame and anxiety, and his sad, bewildered eyes sought the floor as if he no longer had the strength to lift them.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Peter began gently.

"You have—news?" Vincent's voice was tremulous with mingled eagerness and fear.

"That is for you to say." Peter drew the crumpled note from his pocket and handed it to Vincent. "Is this your son's handwriting?"

Slowly the old man's eyes groped their way across the few brief lines of the message. The sheet of paper rattled in his trembling fingers as he returned it to Peter.

"Yes," he said, "that's—my son's writing." He lifted his

hands, covering his face, and Peter saw the slow tears trickle between his fingers. "Why wouldn't he let me help him? Why wouldn't he wait? And now—he's dead." The voice was desolate as the sound of wind in winter leaves.

Peter laid a kindly hand across the bowed shoulders. Vincent might be dead, of course. He might have tried to escape and have drowned before reaching shore. But one thing was certain. If he had really managed to get away, his father had no idea of his whereabouts. There was no mistaking the genuineness of the old man's grief. Peter had meant to use the note as a means of discerning whether Earl Vincent had contrived to communicate with his father. Instead, he found himself bent only on reassurance, with no motive beyond conveying what comfort he might.

"I shouldn't have given it to you like that," he said remorsefully. "I don't know what's happened to your son, any more than you do. But I'm almost sure he didn't commit suicide."

"He didn't——?" Vincent stared at Peter as if he had not heard aright.

"No, he didn't," Peter said with more positiveness than he really felt. A wave of indignation rushed over him against Earl Vincent. Suppose he did manage to elude capture and effaced himself permanently. It was a cruel thing to leave this broken old man to face the remaining years in intolerable suspense, never knowing whether his son was alive or dead.

"I'm going to do my utmost to find your son," he said. "It would be the best thing that could happen for him. It's an awful thing to lead a hunted life all the rest of your days. Worse even than——" He left the sentence unfinished. "And I'll promise you this much," he continued. "If I do find him, I'll give him an earful of the best advice I'm capable of. And I'll let you know."

"You'll tell him—tell him to come home?" Peter winced under the clutch of the fingers that seized his arm.

"If he's alive, I'll find him—and I'll tell him," he promised rashly.

As he descended the steps he glanced across the street to the grocery-store entrance. What he saw there caused him to abandon Bossy and stroll to the opposite pavement. A car which had not been present when Peter entered the house was parked at the corner, and the plain-clothes man stood beside it, engaged in colloquy with a girl who had evidently just descended from the driver's seat.

"Who are you with?" the detective was saying as Peter came within earshot.

"Me?" Peter noted with inward amusement the wide innocence of the blue-gray eyes raised to meet the policeman's gaze. "I'm not with anybody. I'm all alone." She glanced backward at the car as if to assure herself that an additional passenger had not somehow been spirited into it.

"Don't be funny. You know what I mean." The policeman was unimpressed. "Who are you and what are you here for?"

Peter, who regarded himself as immune from surprise at the most unpredictable turns of existence, blinked with amazement at her answer.

"Oh," the strange young woman said airily, "my name is Harris. I'm sob sister on the *Evening Herald,* and I've come to get a story from Mr. Vincent about how it feels to be the father of an escaped murderer."

CHAPTER X

PETER stared at the stranger's half-averted profile with a mixture of astonishment and indignation. Sob sister, indeed! Jimmy would no more allow a sob writer on the *Herald* than he would hire a dodo. What did she think the *Herald* was, anyway? And why—his wrath gave way to puzzled wonder—had she wanted to pretend that she was a reporter? She had evidently not expected to find the house guarded, and had reasons of her own for wishing to communicate with Vincent without revealing her purpose. Otherwise, she would have had no motive for lying. Quick thinking, that, to realize that reporters were likely to visit the house, and that they were the one class of people who would be allowed to do so unchallenged. Peter found himself glancing at the sturdy little figure with something like admiration—even though she had blasphemed the gods of the *Herald* by calling herself a sob sister on its staff.

What did she want with Vincent? Peter's own jesting words of a few minutes before recurred to him: "Too bad I didn't tell you I'd found Vincent and was on my way to break the news to the old man." Could it possibly be? It was a wild chance, but whatever it was she wanted, it was something that she did not wish the police to know. And the only way to find out was to let her go into the house. If he gave her away to the plain-clothes man, a girl with wits as quick as hers had shown themselves to be would only have to say that she was a curiosity seeker or was trying to play a joke, and drive calmly away where she came from.

Peter stepped nonchalantly forward, caught the policeman's eye, and nodded his confirmation of the young woman's identity.

"All right, run along." The words were scarcely out of the watcher's mouth before the girl had turned her back and walked briskly across the street. Peter somehow had the impression that only an alert self-control prevented her from running. She had not glanced at Peter; in fact, he doubted if she had even noticed his presence.

"Yes, she's with the *Herald* all right. New on the job," he affirmed mendaciously. "Well, so long—see you again, if you're stuck out here."

"Oh, I'm stuck," the plain-clothes man said resignedly. "I'd rather be where there's some excitement, but no such luck."

Peter grinned his commiseration. At the moment, he reflected, this particular street corner had offered as much chance for excitement as anyone could ask, provided one knew how to look for it. He noted the direction in which the girl's car was headed, then ambled across the street and, with a final wave of his hand toward the corner grocery store, turned Bossy down a side street, suppressing just in time an urgent desire to whistle. He drove around the block and drew up, leaving his engine running, close to the corner.

He was taking a chance, he knew, but it was a chance that had to be taken. He dared not remain parked directly in front of the house, where he could watch the girl's car and give immediate chase. Not with a girl like that! Peter viewed his unknown adversary with the respect due her talent for mendacity. She would not submit tamely to obvious pursuit—not if she knew it. And if she did know it she would have plenty of time to think up a story or to challenge, quite correctly, the right of a strange young man to question her without a vestige of authority to support his demand for information. On the other hand, if she drove straight ahead

instead of returning in the direction from which she had come, Peter would lose her altogether. It was a gamble, at best, but it was the best bet in sight, and Peter took it.

Half an hour later he was rewarded by the sound of an engine in low gear. It was out of sight, around the corner of the street facing him, but from the length of time before the invisible driver shifted to high, Peter judged that the car was turning around. He silently slipped his own car into gear and sat with his foot on the clutch. In another moment, the little coupé, with the girl at the wheel, passed across the street directly in front of him, and Peter, with a prayer of gratitude to the gods of luck, quietly turned the corner and followed a block behind.

In the two hours that ensued, Peter's prayer of gratitude changed to one of supplication. Once the traffic signals turned against him, and he lost her for several blocks. Once, when they had left the city behind them, his worst fears were fulfilled, and he had to lose precious minutes replenishing Bossy's tank at a gas station. There was nothing to do but to sit helplessly and watch the bobbing rear license plate of the girl's machine disappear around a curve. The station attendant was left with gaping mouth when Peter curtly declined to have the accumulation of dust wiped from his windshield and dashed off without waiting for his change.

It was four miles before he again caught sight of the object of his pursuit. The highway wound through the hills with curves that obscured the view ahead. But Bossy, when put to it, was capable of surprising bursts of speed, despite the rattles of her internal anatomy. Peter, not knowing how close the car ahead might be, dared not sound his horn on the turns. He spun dizzily around the succession of curves, trusting with blind faith that any oncoming cars would keep strictly to their own side of the road. Fortunately, there were no side roads off the highway, and his straining eyes finally picked up a speck on the lower horn of a horseshoe

bend, which, on nearer approach, took on the now familiar outline of the little coupé.

The girl was driving steadily but not furiously. Not once, Peter was sure, had she looked behind. At last they turned off the highway to a side road and from this to a still-narrower, boulder-strewn track which was little more than a trail. There was no danger now that he would be outdistanced, but it was necessary to go slowly if he were to keep out of sight and hearing—Bossy, running in second gear, was anything but inaudible.

The track they were following, climbing ever higher into the coast range, was barely wide enough for a single car, and the road bed made no concessions whatever to the requirements of motor vehicles. Once he crossed the wide bed of a stream, jolting over the round stones of the creek bottom and splashing through water which reached the wheel caps. Here the road lost its identity altogether, and it was with some difficulty that Peter picked it up again, mounting steeply on the other side.

He dared not try to keep the car in sight—the best he could do was to keep his eyes alert for possible side lanes, but it seemed highly improbable that such a road as this should have any subsidiary offshoots. A persistent thumping gave Peter warning that Bossy's left rear tire had failed to stand the strain. It was too late now—she would just have to bump along on the rim. It was inconceivable that they could go much farther, and to waste ten minutes in changing a tire was out of the question. Peter blessed the road which he had hitherto regarded with a baleful eye—at least there could be no question of speed to place the limping Bossy at a disadvantage. But the tire would be torn to ribbands—and if the expedition turned out to be a wild-goose chase, a fat chance there'd be of putting it on the *Herald* expense account!

Peter jerked the chugging Bossy around a hairpin turn and

came to a halt with screaming brakes. Ahead of him, turned sidewise squarely across the road, was the little coupé. And sitting on the running board, calmly surveying the scenery of which Peter apparently was an item too insignificant for attention, was the girl!

Peter, who even under the most adverse conditions had learned to summarize faces quickly, noted a wide, firmly moulded mouth, a turn-up nose peppered with freckles, a square, determined chin, and wide-set eyes of a shade between blue and gray. Her short brown hair, whipped straight by the wind, was uncovered as she twirled a brown felt hat in hands that dropped idly across her knees. The hands were small, square, and brown—compact, competent hands that matched the sturdiness of her small, compact figure. The straight brown eyebrows lifted in faint surprise as she finally allowed her wandering gaze to include Peter in its general survey.

"I don't want to hurry you, but if you've quite finished looking, you'd better put a couple of rocks under your rear wheels. Otherwise you're likely to slide to glory," she remarked in even tones.

Embarrassment was an emotion to which Peter was in ordinary circumstances immune, but he felt his color heightening as, without a word, he climbed out of Bossy and obeyed her excellent advice. She had managed to make him feel like a fool at the very opening of the encounter. Peter, stooping over the rear wheel, grinned appreciation of her strategy. If they were to be antagonists, she was an opponent worthy of his best efforts! He grinned again as he noticed that she had no need to force him to speak first. She could afford to take the offensive.

"You're not going any farther," she announced with unruffled serenity as he rose. "What do you want?"

Peter met the direct gaze of her speculative blue-gray eyes. She came directly to the point, this young woman.

Subterfuge would be wasted on her. Peter felt a stab of acute annoyance at the neatness with which she had seized for herself the position of advantage.

"Suppose I say that I *am* going farther," he said grimly. "What then?"

"You can't," the girl explained with a condescending patience that made Peter long for her to be a man so that he could offer physical combat. "You can't unless you knock me off the road—and I don't think your car is quite equal to that. Do you?"

Peter lifted both hands in a gesture of comical surrender. The girl, however, continued to regard him with grave steadiness.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said severely. "I asked you a question. What do you want?"

There was nothing else for it. The only course was to stake everything on a single bold throw. If he were wrong—well, he would only have proved himself the world's prize idiot, and that wouldn't be a novel feeling, Peter reflected wryly.

"I may be mistaken," he said, watching her closely to observe the effect of his words, "but I have a wild hunch that you may be Ruth Morgan. And I want you to take me to Earl Vincent."

Peter expected a denial. He was counting on some change of expression—a tightening of the lips, a quiver of the eyelids—to give her away. She lowered her eyes briefly to the brown felt hat which continued to twirl lightly under her steady fingers. Then her eyes lifted again, and Peter received the one answer he was least expecting.

"Well," she said calmly, "I won't. And what do you think you can do about it?"

CHAPTER XI

PETER chose a large boulder with a reasonably smooth top and sat down upon it. If he could not knock the girl's coupé off the road, neither could she drive past the firmly anchored Bossy or turn and proceed farther up the road without permitting him to follow. Honors, he felt, were even, and he settled himself for what promised to be an exceedingly interesting interview.

"You don't deny, then," he began, "that you know where Vincent is?"

"I'd deny it quick enough if I thought it would do any good." The firm lips softened in a wistful half smile.

"I'll bet you would!" Peter murmured under his breath.

"I've been thinking and thinking all this time, and I couldn't think up anything good enough," she continued. "You wouldn't be as easy to fool as that policeman."

"You don't mind lying one little bit, do you?"

"No, I don't mind lying—not if it would help Earl," she answered simply.

"Then you really *are* Miss Morgan!"

The girl nodded.

"And you knew I was following all the time? But you didn't look back!" Peter objected.

"I didn't have to." Ruth's shoulders lifted in the faintest possible suggestion of a shrug. "If you'd take the trouble to look into the car, you'd see that it has a rear-sight mirror."

"O-ho! Of course I might have guessed it. But if you knew you were being trailed, and didn't want me along, why didn't you try to give me the slip?"

"What would be the use?" At her tone, Peter looked up sharply at the face confronting him. Despite her wit and her self-assurance, there were faint lines of weariness at the corners of the clear eyes, and something in the set of the firm, sensitive lips showed that youth, for her, had not meant escape from pain. "If I'd tried to get away from you in the city, you'd probably have caught me and taken me to the police station. I don't know much about the third degree, but I was afraid I might not be able to hold out against the police."

"You'd rather take your chances with a perfectly strange man all alone in a wild place like this, where you must be miles from help?"

"I certainly would!" For the first time there was a glint of laughter in the steady eyes. "A fight with a strange young man is the very least of my worries."

Peter felt an absurd twinge of masculine pique at this discounting of potential danger.

"How do you know," he said, trying his best to look stern and threatening, "that I won't kidnap you and hold you prisoner until you tell me what I want to know?"

Ruth considered this possibility with utmost composure.

"Well," she said in her quiet, self-contained voice, as if they were discussing nothing more violent than the weather, "in the first place, now that I have a good look at you, you somehow don't look like a kidnaping sort of person. And in the second place, though I'll admit I was afraid the police might succeed in tricking me, nobody could actually force me into saying anything I didn't want to say, no matter what he did to me. I'm really not naturally timid," she added, with a quaint air of apology.

Peter's respect for the self-possessed young woman on the running board was rapidly growing to admiration. But he did not allow approval of her strength of character to becloud his judgment. She still loved Vincent—that was

obvious. She might be concealing him because she knew that he was guilty of the murder. She might even be concealing him because she knew that he had not committed the murder, for the altogether sufficient reason that she had done it herself. It was difficult to determine what strength of passion might lie behind her self-control. Emotion, gaining in intensity through repression, might have burst forth in who could tell what violent release.

Her acknowledged fear of the police—was it fear for herself, fear of what she might reveal concerning Vincent, or fear of what Vincent might reveal concerning her if she permitted them to find and question him? Peter's next remark was framed with the hope that, despite her caution, her manner or expression might afford him a clue to the answer to at least one of the many questions that thronged his mind.

"You've admitted that you're afraid of the police," he said bluntly. "You let me follow you out here because you were afraid I'd catch you in town and take you to the station. But if you won't go to them, what's to prevent me from bringing the police out here—Mahomet coming to the mountain? Had you thought of that?"

"Of course I've thought of it!" the girl flashed. "What else do you suppose I've been doing but thinking? It would take you at least an hour to reach the nearest telephone, and another two hours to get anybody here. By that time we'd be gone. You simply wouldn't find us, that's all!"

"'Us'? He's with you, then!" Peter pounced upon the tell-tale word.

The brown hands clamped down upon the hat in her lap. By the glimpse of teeth that caught at her lower lip Peter sensed the supreme effort behind her unshakable morale.

"Tell me," he said, a new kindness in his voice, "why are you doing this?"

Her face whitened under its tan.

"I'm doing it," she said doggedly, "because it's what Earl wants."

With extreme deliberation Peter drew his pipe from his pocket, filled it, and stooped to strike a match on the rough surface of the boulder. He might have pressed his advantage. The girl was clearly on the point of breaking. Instead, he gave her these moments of grace in which to restore her self-command. It might be a mistake; but Peter, as he ground the match stub under his heel, had made his decision.

"Listen," he said, raising his eyes at last from the bowl of his pipe, "let's quit being enemies. I'll admit you make a bang-up enemy, and I'm no slouch that way myself. But I'm going to right-about-face. I'm going to put it to you from your own point of view—from Earl's point of view. You did something mighty clever in spiriting Earl off that boat—heaven only knows how you managed it. You're shielding a fugitive from justice, but we'll let that pass. The point is, that if this is what Earl wants, he oughtn't to want it. It's the most foolish move possible. You've had him less than twenty-four hours, and in those twenty-four hours I've found you. That ought to be enough to show you that he can't keep it up forever. I put it to your common sense."

The brown head was bent so low that he could not see her face. There was not a movement in the tense, rigid figure.

"I hate to say what will hurt you, but I've got to," Peter went on. "Remember that bandit, Tanko. He got away and hid himself for four years. He was a professional criminal, with expert knowledge of every dodge, every nook and cranny of the underworld to help him. But they got him at last. And what a life! What chance do you think Vincent will have? He'll be caught, inevitably, and when he's caught he'll be a thousand times worse off than if he'd

never escaped. And with all that horror—the never-relaxing terror of the hunted creature—behind him!"

"I know." The words were an almost inaudible murmur. "I told him."

"You'll have to believe I'm honest when I say I'm looking at his side of it now. For all I know, he's a criminal, but it's certain anyway that he's been criminally foolish. I ask you to let me talk to him. Give me the chance to put it to him, for his own sake. He's sure to be captured. But to be captured is one thing, and to give himself up voluntarily is another. Let him stand trial—face it out. If he's innocent——"

"Don't be a fool!" With a movement startlingly swift, the girl sprang to her feet, small brown fists clenched at her side. The brown hat fell to the ground and rolled across the road between them, unnoticed. "Of course he's innocent! But that doesn't mean he can prove it."

"He doesn't have to prove it," Peter explained meticulously. "It's the other side that has to prove he's guilty. A man is presumed innocent until he is proved guilty, you know. That's the law."

"The law!" The eyes that met Peter's were all blue now, the gray lost in an incandescent blaze of scorn. "I've worked in a lawyer's office. If they had Earl, do you suppose they'd bother to look for anyone else? That's what makes it so desperate. Oh, I know it's madness for him to try to hide! But if he gave himself up it would be sheer despair. You'd think innocence had nothing to fear. But it has. They've convicted innocent men before this, and found it out—too late." Her voice sank to a whisper as she dropped back on the running board, shrinking, a small, huddled figure, from that insupportable vision. "If they had Earl," she repeated huskily, "who would even try to look any farther to find somebody else who might have done it?"

"*I* would," Peter said with an emphasis that surprised him. "I will," he repeated more calmly, "if you'll give me the chance—and if he convinces me that he's really innocent."

"You see?" The white lips twisted in a wan smile. "Even to you, it's his innocence he has to prove."

"I guess you're right," Peter confessed. "Naturally, they wouldn't have been hunting him in the first place if there weren't indications that he's guilty. But I'm truly starting with an open mind. There's the evidence, but on the other hand everybody I've talked to who knows him well—his father, and Captain Marquand, and now you—seems sure that he didn't do it."

"You talked to—— But who are you?"

The tension between them suddenly relaxed. It dawned upon them both for the first time that she had not thought to ask the question before and that it had not occurred to him to tell her unasked. In that immediate clash of unsheathed personalities there had been no room for strangeness, still less for formality.

"Me? I'm Peter Piper of the *Herald*."

"The—*Herald!*" Ruth gasped.

"That same *Herald* whose name you took in vain. And that reminds me, I have a crow to pick with you. Jimmy simply loathes sob sisters."

"You'd just left before I came." Ruth ignored the persiflage. "Mr. Vincent told me about you. He thought you were kind. He—trusted you."

"I think you might trust me too," Peter said. "I'm in dead earnest when I say I'll hunt this thing down if Vincent gives himself up. You know yourself that I'm right—that it's the best thing he can do, for his own sake."

"And suppose I give you the chance. Suppose I let you talk to him, and you do persuade him to give himself up. And suppose he fails to convince you. Suppose, at the end of it all, you still believe him guilty. What then?"

Peter knocked the ashes from his pipe and thrust it back into his pocket before he answered.

"Why, then," he said steadily, "I'll make for the nearest telephone and I'll use every bit of information he gives me to help the police to track him down!"

"You're honest, at any rate." The girl's lips tightened bitterly.

"That was one of the most difficult bits of truth telling I ever did in my life. I wanted dreadfully to lie to you. Well, I didn't."

"You make it terribly hard for me to decide. I do think you're right. I tried to persuade him that it was the thing to do, but I couldn't. And then—I came to believe, myself, that it would be utterly hopeless, so I couldn't argue any more. I couldn't ask him to go—to his death. But if I take you to him, and then you don't believe him——"

"He told you he didn't do it, and you believed him. He told Captain Marquand he didn't do it, and the captain believed him. Neither one of you is dumb. Well, I'm not precisely dumb, either. If his story really convinced you, you ought to have enough faith in it to believe that it'll convince me too. If you haven't—then there's either something wrong with you or something wrong with the story."

Ruth's chin lifted proudly.

"I do believe it," she said simply. "I believe it so utterly that I'm going to take the risk—take Earl's life in my hands, and put it in yours. I believe in you too, in your promise to help—perhaps because I have to. It's too much for me to handle alone, I see that; and I don't know of anybody else."

Without another word she got into the coupé and nosed it cautiously back in line with the road, motioning Peter to follow her.

CHAPTER XII

Bossy bumped along in the rear of the coupé for another mile before Ruth put out her hand to stop. The road came to an end where the trees had been thinned to a clearing, at the far end of which, nestling into the forest, stood a tiny cabin with a thin streamer of smoke wavering upward from its chimney. Ruth parked her car in a level space at the side, switched off the ignition with steady fingers, and turned to face Peter who had alighted just behind her. She stood very straight against a big tree trunk, her square shoulders thrown back, her hands in the pockets of her brown trench coat, and regarded him steadfastly.

"There's just one thing I ought to tell you," she said in low, level tones. "If anything happens to Earl because of this—if you've tricked me—I think I'd kill you without minding it at all."

"Let's hope it won't be necessary." Peter was smiling, but beneath the smile his eyes were grave. Ruth Morgan had furnished him with another item for future reference. She could calmly threaten to murder anyone who harmed Earl Vincent. She did not deal in heroics—there was no doubting the sincerity of her words.

Suppose she had had reason to believe that Luna was harming him. Suppose she had felt that Luna was dragging him down in the toils of a hopeless infatuation which he was powerless to combat—unless Luna herself were removed. When she found that Earl was suspected of the crime, would she not then have come forward to save him?

But she knew something about law. She might know that a confession is not accepted as conclusive without corroborative evidence.

If she had planned the crime so carefully as to leave no evidence behind her—and if Ruth Morgan ever did commit a murder, Peter was quite sure she would do it coolly, with all her wits sharpened—she might have feared that her story would not be believed, that it would be taken as a chivalrous attempt to take Earl's guilt upon her devoted shoulders. In insisting, even to the point of threatening his life, that Peter must clear Earl by finding the real criminal, she might be deliberately goading him to discover her own guilt in such a manner that it could not possibly be mistaken for a mad generosity born of love. If Earl had been in hiding since the night of the murder, so, for that matter, had Ruth.

Peter's words, when he spoke, gave no hint of the ideas which he had parked for future consideration.

"Nobody would ever have suspected that there was a house away off here," he remarked. "How did you happen to find it?"

"It's a shack used for hunting in the deer season." Ruth had turned to lead the way to the cabin and spoke over her shoulder. "It belongs to the man I work for, and he lent it to me when I wanted a cheap vacation somewhere off by myself."

Peter smiled again at Ruth's retreating back. It was no use asking her if she hadn't been afraid to live in the woods alone. He remembered the apologetic air with which she had disavowed the ordinary young girl's timidity. With his flair for probing human nature wherever he found it, he surmised that she was bitterly aware that a young person gifted with quite so complete a poise was deficient in allurement. Peter began to see how Earl had turned from her clear loyalty and devotion, her keen, straight mind, and

her heart that knew no fear to the enchantment and mystery of Luna. It would not even have occurred to her that she was casting aside the supposedly priceless treasure of a young girl's reputation in bringing him to this cabin where she lived alone. Still less would she perceive that so perfect an un-self-consciousness would hardly be flattering to the masculine egoism of Earl or any man.

"We do just love to have women think we're dangerous," he murmured, half aloud. "And she doesn't think anything's dangerous—she simply doesn't care whether it is or not."

Ruth had flung open the door of the cabin as he spoke and stood with her back against it, ushering him in.

"Earl," she called, "I've brought someone to talk to you. I hope I'm doing right. Anyway, I did it." Her voice held a note of appeal that Peter had not heard before.

Peter blinked in the doorway, accustoming his eyes to the dimmer light of the interior. Earl Vincent sat on a couch drawn across one side of the room which evidently served as joint kitchen, dining room, and living quarters. His head was bowed and his hands hung limply between his knees.

"You did right," he said, without moving or looking up. "You're quite right to give me up," he repeated dully. "I ought never have dragged you into it in the first place. Are we to go now?" He rose to his feet.

Ruth advanced to the table in the center of the room and lighted a coal-oil lamp that hung on chains suspended from the beams of the ceiling. She replaced the chimney and adjusted the wick before she spoke. Only Peter, watching her closely as she stood with her back to the couch, observed the rapid blinking of her eyelids, holding back tears that were dry before she turned.

"Earl Vincent," she said, "you know less about people than any human being I ever encountered. You've known me half my life, and do you still think I could be 'dragged' into anything? If there was any dragging, I did it. This man

is Peter Piper. That's just about all I know about him—except that he has a good deal of sense."

Peter bowed ironically at this exceedingly downright compliment.

"You seem to have a natural affinity for trouble, Vincent," he said easily, flinging himself full length upon a rustic armchair. "It looks as if you need somebody to get you out of it. I seem to be elected—provided you deserve to be got out, which remains to be seen."

Under cover of extracting his pipe from his sagging coat pocket, Peter glanced keenly at the face of the man on the couch. It was a face haggard and spent, yet not even the lines of agony could expunge its underlying boyishness. A lovable face—lovable because, despite their present anxiety, the brown eyes looked out upon the world with an ingenuous expectation of kindness and fair dealing and the lips curved naturally to merriment. The face of a dreamer, to whom the harsher aspects of reality would remain forever incomprehensible.

Peter understood why Captain Marquand had looked on the young radio operator with fatherly affection. Irresponsible, Marquand had called him. Peter looked fixedly at Vincent's hands, twisted now between his knees. They were smooth, plump hands, with fingers that tapered almost to points. Had they plunged a knife into Luna's breast and pulled the trigger of a gun? Imaginative, impractical hands. The cruelty of sudden disillusion might have driven him to murder—reality ripping through. The hideousness of that revelation could have roused him to a horror of madness.

But if Earl Vincent committed murder, it would have been on sudden impulse. He would be incapable of arranging an elaborate stage setting for the purpose of confusing the police. Imaginative hands. Yes, if Vincent had seen the enchantment stripped from Luna, he might have struck out

blindly against the intolerable truth—and it would have been quite like him to have laid his love letters on her breast, a final tribute to her devastating spell. Bad judgment, of course—but good judgment, Peter opined, was the last quality in the world to expect of Vincent. Looking back upon Luna and her relations with Vincent, in the new light of this first actual contact with the naïve charm of the suspected murderer's personality, Peter was struck with a sudden idea, and gave it immediate expression.

"I had quite a long talk with Luna on Monday, the day before she was killed," he said slowly. "She gave me to understand that she was in fear of some person or persons —so much so that I think she was far more candid with me than she was in the habit of being. Funny, the longing people have to be understood. Of course there's no means of knowing whether the person she was afraid of was the one who actually killed her, but now that I've seen you, I'm sure of one thing: you were not the person she feared."

"No," Vincent shook his head, "Luna had no reason to be afraid of me. But I've certainly made an awful mess of things. I don't see why anybody should go to the trouble of trying to get me out."

"Well, for one thing," Peter said severely, "the way you've muddled about has inconvenienced, to say the least of it, a number of other people. Captain Marquand is in very hot water indeed for allowing you to give him the slip."

"I never thought of that!"

"You wouldn't!" Peter exclaimed wrathfully. " 'Look before you leap' is a motto you don't seem to have heard. I don't suppose you thought, either, that you've made Miss Morgan guilty of concealing a fugitive from justice. I'm not quite sure whether that's a felony, but I believe it is. You'd better learn to look around you a bit and wake up to the

effect of your actions on your friends and the world at large. So far, you don't seem to have the faintest notion what it's all about."

Vincent stared at Peter as if the reporter had suddenly slapped him in the face.

"Oh, I'm talking to you like a Dutch uncle, I know. That's what you need. You've gone along, liking everybody and having everybody like you to the extent of breaking their necks to keep you from getting hurt. You'd have to bump your shins against reality before you'd even know it was there. Well, it's there, all right, and you've bumped your shins against it good and hard—not to mention other people's shins."

"That's enough!" Ruth's fingers clutched at the table behind her. "You shan't talk to Earl like that!"

"Yes, that's enough." Earl had risen again from the couch. "I don't know what you came here for in the first place, but you're going to be useful. You can take me down to the police station." The outline of Vincent's boyish face had subtly changed. Behind the tightened lips, Peter saw the sharp angle of his clenched jaw.

"There you go again!" Peter, relaxed in the armchair, waved the hand holding his pipe, motioning Vincent back to his seat. "Acting on impulse! We're not going to the police station—not yet awhile. Do you suppose I'm going to have them clap you into jail and hold you incommunicado, with me not knowing what's happened? If you killed her, say so, and we'll see what can be done about it."

"But you said——" Ruth's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I know what I said," Peter interrupted sharply. "I said if I thought he did it I'd be after him hammer and tongs. Well, I wouldn't, and that's that. I'm as bad as all the rest of you. Now that I've seen Vincent, I like him. Murder or no murder," he added whimsically. "If he did it, he doubt-

less had perfectly foolish and impractical reasons. Whatever he did, I just can't see Earl Vincent answering to the legal description of a 'malignant and abandoned heart.' So let's hear all about it."

"I don't see any good in going over it all." Earl sank back on the couch, his body sagging forward in an attitude of utter discouragement. "I haven't even told Ruth what actually happened. I know well enough how it looks. I wouldn't have the nerve to expect anybody to believe me."

"I'm like the White Queen—I practise believing at least seven impossible things every morning before breakfast," Peter grinned. "Just try me. As a starter, try me on this one: Did you really kill Luna? If so, why, and if not, why not?"

CHAPTER XIII

"WHY not?" Earl looked up, puzzled by the unusual form of Peter's question. "Why, I—I just didn't think of it! One doesn't, you know."

"Some people do," Peter said quietly. "You were in pretty desperate straits about her. You could neither tear yourself loose from her nor win her. That is a state of mind that has driven men to violence before this."

"I'd rather not talk about her, if you don't mind. She's —dead." Vincent stared before him with wide, hurt eyes. "I didn't know what to do—I was ready to do almost anything. I can see how she'd goad a person to kill her. But it didn't enter my head to do it myself."

Peter suspended judgment. Either Earl was telling the truth, or he was capable of consummate acting. That ingenuous face might conceal unexpected powers. The dreamer might well have formed the habit of dreaming so vividly that he could project his fantasies convincingly, giving them the outer aspect of truth because for the time being he was really living them.

"You can't just shelve this thing because it makes you uncomfortable to talk about it," he said with brusque impatience. "You've been running away long enough. I'm not sure what you were running away from. Yourself, maybe. Anyway, the time has come when you've got to face it, whether you like it or not. You'd taken an apartment to be as near Luna as possible. Did you see her on the night of her death?"

Vincent shook his head.

"No. She was—was annoyed with me for taking the apartment. She had sent me away. I hadn't seen her for several days." He seemed to force the words out with difficulty. "She—refused to take me seriously any longer."

Was he using those long pauses to give himself time to think, to watch his story for possible discrepancies, or were they only the sign of his painful effort to face the bitterness of reality? At any rate, he had revealed a motive. He had been cast aside by the woman who had victimized him, bound him to her with a helpless and tempestuous passion that took no account of reason.

"You thought she turned you down because you hadn't enough money?" Peter probed.

The man on the couch nodded dumbly, his head in his hands.

"All right, let's go on from there," Peter continued briskly. "If you didn't see her that night, where were you?"

"I was in San Francisco. I caught the owl boat back across the bay," Vincent answered without looking up.

"That would be at one o'clock. And you went to your apartment, dashed upstairs to pack a suitcase, and drove away again—without knowing that Luna had been killed?"

Vincent nodded again.

"I told you you wouldn't believe me!" he added bitterly.

"I don't know yet whether I do or not." Peter's voice was edged with irascibility. "I'm asking you to give me the chance to believe you."

Vincent had evidently expected either frank skepticism or a hypocritical reassurance. He lifted his face from his hands and eyed Peter for the first time with a gleam of half-incredulous hope.

"I think you'd better help us to get it straightened out, Earl." Ruth broke her silence for the first time since her initial protest against Peter's ruthless method of attack.

"Otherwise, I don't see how either of us, or anybody, can be the least bit of good."

"Very well." Earl straightened his bent shoulders. "I owe you enough to do whatever you say, Ruth. What is it you want to know?" He turned to Peter with a new decisiveness in his manner.

"Where were you in San Francisco? If you had an alibi for the time of the murder, you were no end silly not to come out with it!" Peter flared.

"Not so silly as you think," Earl countered. "I didn't know I needed an alibi until my going away had already made it look as if I were trying to escape. And as an alibi, it isn't worth a darn." His eyes met Peter's defiantly. "I spent the evening in San Francisco with a crook—a bank robber—who was in hiding there, having violated his parole by coming to the city."

Ruth drew in her breath sharply with a gasp of surprise, but Peter's figure did not shift from its pose of relaxation in the armchair.

"And why did you pack your things and leave?" he asked.

"Because I was going south to take part in a bank hold-up myself!"

"The deuce you were!" Peter knocked the ashes from his pipe against the arm of his chair. "That's rather interesting. Now whatever put it into your head to rob a bank?"

"I needed money—a lot of money. What I could make—well, it wasn't enough to be any good at all. I met some fellows—they did a lot of mysterious talking, but it never came to anything. I think they were trying me out. Anyway, it was through them that I met this chap I'm telling you about. He'd been in prison—armed robbery, it was—and paroled to a lumber camp after five years on condition that he didn't return to San Francisco. He stuck the lumber camp for two months, and then chucked it and beat his

way to the city." Now that he had embarked on his story, Vincent's words came rapidly.

"He was going straight—just hiding out. Then he got word from some of his old gang, wanting him to go on this job in the south. He didn't want to go, but he didn't want to turn them down. So he sent for me and suggested that I go in his place. And I did."

"Hold up a minute!" Peter halted the flow of hurried, staccato speech. "Why didn't he want to get his share of the money for himself?"

"Because he was busy. He was trying to finish a book."

If Vincent had been striving to make an effect on Peter, he achieved his ambition. Peter leaned forward, his pipe clattering to the floor.

"Trying to finish——? But of course! I know who you mean. That would be Howard Basker. I read his first one —the one he wrote in prison. It would be exactly like him to break his parole because he couldn't write in a lumber camp. And then he couldn't be bothered with robbing a bank while he was working on a manuscript. I can see that—I talked with him at San Quentin, when his first stuff was published. But he wouldn't turn the old gang down when they sent for him, for fear they'd think he was high hat. Um-huh, that's Howard Basker to the life."

"You're right—it was Basker. You know Basker, so you can see that it's all quite reasonable. But it would sound absurd to anybody else."

"Yes," Peter agreed. "He wouldn't be much to rely on in the way of an alibi. He'd skip, rather than have it discovered that he'd broken his parole and face being sent back to San Quentin. By the way, have you ever robbed so much as a chicken roost in your life?"

"No," Earl admitted, "I haven't. But I didn't let them know that. I pretended I'd been holding up gas stations

but hadn't been caught. I read up some details in the newspapers, and made out they'd happened to me."

"The deuce you did!" Despite his absorbed interest, Peter could not repress a grin at this novel use of the press.

"Of course they looked on me as a beginner. Basker would never have sent me if he hadn't been so dead set against going himself. I was just to act as a look-out."

"And didn't it occur to you what would happen if you got caught?" Peter asked curiously.

"I didn't look ahead that far. I'd decided that I'd do anything—anything at all—to get money. It was the only way I could see. And, in a way, I wanted to do it. It was something exciting, something that would take my mind off—other things." Vincent paused for a moment, then went on. "I flung some things into my suitcase, put my old hunting rifle into the car—I don't own a pistol, but I didn't want to admit it to Basker for fear he'd see that I wasn't the experienced crook I'd made myself out to be—and drove south." Vincent's voice dropped, as if he considered his story at an end.

"But did you actually rob the bank?" Peter inquired. "I don't seem to remember any bank hold-ups this week in that part of the state."

"No, I didn't. I guess the plan must have fallen through when I failed to show up. I don't know. I really haven't thought of it since."

"You haven't——" It seemed to Peter that he did nothing but repeat the beginnings of sentences in blank amazement.

"I saw the papers Tuesday evening," Vincent explained. "I saw that—Luna—was dead. I stopped in a little town and bought a paper and laid it on the seat beside me. I'd got out of town before I glanced down at the headlines as I drove. It was then—that I went into the ditch." The boyish brown eyes were wide and blank with remembered horror.

"And then?" Peter's voice was very gentle, recalling him to the present.

"I hardly know what I did then. It was all a sort of welter. I may have sat by the car for hours. I don't know. I don't even remember getting out. But I remember there were stars. I just wandered along the highway. Somebody honked at me, and I stepped aside mechanically. I remember that, because it was then I noticed I'd taken my suitcase out of the car, I haven't the faintest idea why. It began to pull at my arm, and I threw it into an irrigation ditch.

"The next thing I remember was some time Thursday. I found myself on the waterfront. I think I'd got there by some sort of instinct. The peace of ships—I've always felt that. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd been without food until I smelled coffee and turned into a little restaurant. I sat down at a table. The man on the other side began to make conversation, and I must have answered somehow. I didn't pay much attention to what he was saying. It was like a distant buzz in my ears, until I'd had my second cup of coffee. Then it all whirled into focus, clear enough."

"That was Smith?" Peter suggested.

"Yes, he told me his name was Smith." Vincent looked up, surprised.

"Oh, I'm not a mind reader. Captain Marquand told me," Peter explained. "And he sold you his ticket?"

"The first thing I heard clearly was something about the *Admiral Grayson*. It was a name—it was like hearing the name of home when you've been a long time lost. Smith had come down to the docks, expecting to sail on her, and then a boy had chased him from his hotel with a telegram calling him East. He was groaning about the waste of his ticket. That gave me the idea. I must have been nearly all in without knowing it. I just felt suddenly that if I could get on board the *Grayson* and hear those old familiar engines chugging under me it would all fade away. I'd find that

the last year hadn't happened, that Luna wasn't dead—that I'd never known her."

The essential unreality of Vincent's consuming passion was revealed in those last words. He did not wish Luna alive and back in his life—he wished most deeply of all that she had never come into it.

"Did this man Smith tell you the name of his hotel?" Peter jerked himself back from speculation to the practical issue.

Vincent shook his head.

"Or where he was going in the East?"

"No, I didn't ask him."

Peter considered this information in silence. Nothing so far had overthrown the hypothesis that Smith was pure invention. Vincent had accounted for the missing suitcase and for the presence of the rifle in his overturned car, but there was no substantiation for either of these explanations, and the one part of his story which might have been corroborated, the purchase of the ticket from Smith, remained as unsupported as ever.

There was just one point that he could not have invented. Vincent really knew Basker. No one in the world could have made up a bank robber who refused to rob a bank because he was writing a book, and have the bizarre picture correspond to the character of a real person. He must know Basker, but acquaintance with Basker was hardly a certificate of good character. It did not follow that he had been with Basker on the night of the murder. Peter retrieved his pipe from the floor, relighted it, and spoke at last between puffs of smoke which half obscured his face.

"You do make things extraordinarily difficult," he said whimsically. "But I'll not try to disentangle them yet awhile. What happened after you got on the boat?"

CHAPTER XIV

"I JUST lay on my bunk for a while, trying to let those chugging engines churn some kind of world again out of chaos. Luna, you see, had been my whole life since I first saw her when she came down on that same boat a year ago, while I was radio operator. She'd been the focus of everything. And now she was dead, leaving a kind of whirling emptiness. I must have slept, for when I woke up the numbness in my mind was gone. It all came crashing down on me. It was as if the deck had broken to pieces under my feet. That was what it was like—shipwreck." Vincent leaned back on the couch, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes staring into space as he sought words to convey the sense of the hours he was living again in memory.

"I tried to pull myself together. I could go home to my dad's place, and hunt some kind of job. Only what was the use of a job? What was the use of anything? But I couldn't just lie there any longer, with the world cracking up around me and the engines thudding out: 'Luna—is dead, Luna—is dead,' over and over. I really thought I was going crazy, and I instinctively grabbed out for something—some little, sane thing that would pull me back to the rest of life, that wasn't Luna. I jumped up from the bed and went up to the radio room to send a message to Dad that I was coming home. It wasn't necessary, but it was something to do.

"When the radio operator turned around and saw me in the doorway he looked as if he'd seen a ghost. He'd been

my assistant, and a great chum, in my days on the *Grayson,* and took the job over when I left because I couldn't bear to be traveling all the time and not seeing Luna."

"I don't wonder he was a bit taken aback," Peter commented. "The whole state was after you. And for you to come walking in on him like that——! But he wasn't the one who gave you away—I understand it was a passenger who did that."

"I didn't know then that there was anything to give me away for," Earl said. "He just stared at me for a minute.

" 'Gosh!' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

"He looked so queer that I didn't stop to think he couldn't, of course, really know what Luna had been in my life. It just seemed that he'd guessed, or seen it in my face, and we'd been such good friends it would be a relief to talk it all out to him. It was the same sort of impulse that had made me reach out to my dad.

" 'You know—what's happened?' I asked, but he stopped me at once.

" 'My God, yes,' he said. 'And I tell you, Earl, no matter what you've done, I'll stand by you till hell freezes over.'

"I was still too dazed to wonder what he meant, but he was somebody to cling to. He was somebody that had reached me from the world outside—the world outside Luna. There wasn't any point now in sending the radiogram to my father; Jake was so much nearer. I held out my hand to him, and he gripped it.

" 'I've got to have time to think,' he said. 'The assistant's coming in to relieve me in a few minutes. He mustn't find you here.'

"I certainly didn't feel much like meeting strangers. I was suddenly awfully tired, and willing enough to do whatever Jake said. I was too tired to ask questions, or even to think them.

" 'You slip back to your room now,' he ordered. 'As soon

as I'm free here I'll come down to you. Don't go out again —wait for me.'

"I gave him the number of my cabin, and stumbled out. It must have been on the way back that the passenger saw me, for I'd been back only a few minutes when Jake burst open the door without knocking.

" 'My God, Earl, they've caught you!' he said. 'The captain's just sent a message——'

"I had just time to think that I must really have gone over the line—that this was insanity. I'd read about people who saw and heard things that weren't there. Either Jake was crazy, or Jake wasn't there at all. I reached out, wondering if he'd vanish if I tried to touch him. But at that moment there came a tap at the door, and a steward told me the captain wanted to see me immediately."

"I know." Peter nodded. "The captain told me about that part. He put you on, your honor not to try to escape. And then you did." Peter's lips were clamped on his pipe in a stern line.

"Yes," Vincent admitted with curious calm, "I did. I was a coward."

"Oh—*no!*" The words burst furiously from Ruth's lips in a gasp of protest.

Peter glanced at her with quick sympathy. Cowardice would be very hard for her to comprehend. Would she understand the underlying depth of courage required to admit the malign triumph of fear?

"I didn't know——" The blank incomprehension in her voice was more accusing than the bitterest reproach.

"That Captain Marquand put me on my word of honor —and I broke that word?" Earl had forgotten Peter. He looked straight across the room at Ruth, and, as he looked, he pulled himself erect. It was thus, Peter thought as he watched him, that a man might face a firing squad.

"It hardly made an impression on me, what he was say-

ing. I don't offer that as an excuse," he added hastily, "but I'm trying to look at it as it really was. It wasn't until I got back to my room that I fully understood what it meant. It wasn't till then that I could really think. I'd been trying to grasp the bare fact of Luna's death. Now I had to force things clear—that I was wanted for her murder. At first it seemed wildly absurd. But the more I thought of it, the more plainly I saw that it didn't look absurd to anyone else. Jake was my friend, and Jake believed it. Jake would stand by me, he said, till hell froze over—but Jake believed it.

"I sat there with my head in my hands and tried to look into the future. It wouldn't be so bad if they'd just kill me and get it over with, but they wouldn't. I saw how every single thing I'd done seemed diabolically planned to point to my guilt. I'd read about the third degree—how they kept men awake for days and nights on end, questioning them. It wouldn't do me any good to break down and confess—they'd want details, and there were no details I could give them. Sleep. They didn't let you sleep. They beat you up, too, I'd heard, but that didn't seem to matter so much.

"Sleep—— I actually dozed off, there in the cabin, trying to think it out, but the jerk of my head dropping down on the table caught me up again. I couldn't think of any details to give them—I couldn't think of anything. Then I saw how I could be sure of sleep, of no more thinking. All I had to do was to go to the rail and jump off. That would settle everything. I'd have to let Dad know, and Captain Marquand. Then I'd drop overboard. Perhaps it would be better if I'd done it."

"No!" Ruth was leaning forward, her hands strained together in her lap. "Anything but that! Oh, Earl, I will save you somehow! I will!"

"No, you won't, Ruth." Vincent's voice was at the same time gentle and inexorable. "It's about time I took hold of my own life. I've had hours to think about it, while you were

gone. I've been tossed about hither and yon, always by other people. I've never figured what I wanted to do, and done it—I mean the thing you want to do that goes deeper than desire, something like the bottom part of the sea that the waves never reach. I let Luna have my life—I didn't even know there was a deeper part, below the storm. I let Basker send me down to rob the bank. I grabbed at things on the surface. You see where it's brought me—and not me alone. There's Captain Marquand—and you. Well, I've had enough of it. It doesn't matter a lot whether I'm saved or not. But whatever happens to me, it's going to be my own doing."

The man and the girl faced each other, oblivious of Peter. And it was the girl's eyes that dropped. Her face was dead white, but when she lifted it her look was radiant.

"All right," she said, with a sudden, tremulous smile. "I'll keep out of your way. Of course I've always loved you, Earl. But now—now I'm proud of you."

"I know," Earl said softly. "I'm sorry. I'm not worth half what you've done for me—or what you've felt. I wish you wouldn't mind so much what happens to me."

"I won't mind—truly I won't." The words were spoken with childlike simplicity. "Whatever happens, I shall be proud of you." Her eyes were dark with pain, but beneath the pain shone courage, gallant and undaunted.

Peter rapped his pipe sharply on the chair arm.

"It's all very well for you to take your own line, but you'll find that the rest of us are likely to come in handy, for all that," he said, shattering the tension of the moment with his matter-of-fact tones. "How did you get off the boat?"

"It was Jake that took me in hand that time," Vincent said, his lips twisting in a self-scornful smile. "I'd just finished the note when he came in. He'd already sent a radiogram for my father and a lawyer to meet me at the dock. Then he decided that wouldn't do. You see, he thought I'd committed the murder, and he was sure I'd never hold out

against questioning. He'd been doing some meditating about the third degree on his own account.

"He had it all arranged when he came. He had a bundle under his arm—a uniform he'd filched from a member of the crew. He had me change, and took my suit to put away with his own things. He watched till the coast was clear and he could slip me out to wait while the first officer checked over the crew. The first officer is a new man, and lots of the crew were hardly known to him by sight. Jake had counted on that. He'd found out, too, that the passengers and crew had not been informed that a prisoner was on board, so there was no reason for them to be watchful or suspicious until the last minute, when my room was found empty, and then everything would be confusion for a few seconds, at least.

"It was a hundred-to-one chance, but Jake urged me to take it. I didn't care what I did. I just followed what he said. There was something in me—some instinct of life, I suppose—that made me reach out for the chance he offered. It was a gleam of light in all the horror, a chance to get away, clean away from it all. I didn't look beyond that, and I didn't look back. I forgot Captain Marquand. It was just a means of escape—from that third degree, from the men who flashed a light in your face and wouldn't let you sleep. Anyway, I did it. I still had the vague idea in my mind that if Jake's plan didn't work I could jump overboard rather than be caught.

"But everything worked. The fog helped; it kept the passengers inside and off the deck. The crew were all together in a bunch, after they'd been checked over. By that time, of course, I'd heard a shout, and knew they'd found out that I wasn't in my room. Jake stood in front of the door of the broom closet where he'd hidden me, and when the right moment came, he rapped with his knuckles and I slipped out and joined the crew. The next thing I knew, I was down the gangway and on the wharf. I hadn't an

idea in my head as to what to do next. I just merged with the crowd. And then, all of a sudden, there was Ruth at my elbow, pulling me along to her car. It didn't even strike me as strange to find her there."

Peter turned to Ruth with lively curiosity.

"But how could you possibly have got word? Captain Marquand radioed the police, but we got the news too late for the last edition of the evening papers. And here were you, miles from nowhere!"

"Mr. Vincent telephoned me, when he got the message to meet Earl. Jake sent it, but it was signed with Earl's name, you see, so I drove down and went with him to meet the boat."

"Telephoned——?"

"There's a farmhouse a quarter of a mile away, where I've been getting eggs and butter and such since I've been here. They have a telephone there."

"And you told me there wasn't a telephone within an hour's drive!"

"So I did," Ruth answered serenely. "I thought if you knew there was a telephone so near, you could send word to the police and then stand guard here and keep us from getting away before they came."

"You and George Washington are just no relation at all, are you!" Peter exclaimed.

"I told you I'd lie if I thought it would do Earl any good." Ruth's eyes were candid as a child's.

"Well you did a good job of it," Peter admitted with grudging admiration. "You do keep your wits about you."

"I had to," Ruth said with characteristic directness. "I was as surprised as anybody when I caught sight of Earl on the wharf. I didn't dare tell his father I'd seen him. I couldn't trust him not to give himself away. I didn't know what had happened on board, but I'd heard the shout that he'd escaped, and then I saw him. It seemed the only

thing to do, to get him away as quickly as possible. So I did."

"You would!"

"It really was easy." Ruth smiled in response to Peter's tone of ironic admiration. "It had all happened so quickly —the extra police hadn't got down to the waterfront yet. As soon as we got in the car, I had Earl put on my trench coat—at night, nobody could tell whether it was a man's coat or a woman's—and I wrapped a rug around his knees so that the sailor's uniform wouldn't show. I didn't dare drive across on the ferry, so I went down the peninsula and across the Dumbarton bridge and up the other side. I was terribly frightened that they might have got word to the bridge tender, but they hadn't. He hardly looked at us. I brought Earl here. I knew his father would be worried, so I went down to-day to tell him. That's really all there was to it."

"And all that time you were careering around in the middle of the night with a man who, for all you knew, was a murderer!"

"He wasn't a murderer to me," Ruth said with grave simplicity. "He was just Earl. Of course, when he told me he hadn't done it, I knew he hadn't. Before that, I didn't think about anything but getting him away."

"Earl's reputation for veracity must be considerably better than yours, young woman, if that's all it took to convince you," Peter murmured.

"Then you do believe him! You couldn't joke about it if you didn't," Ruth challenged.

"I'll go this far," Peter answered slowly. "I'm ready to regard Earl Vincent as a last-resort suspect."

"That's all I have a right to expect," Earl said. "I didn't kill Luna, and there must be some way of finding out who did. If not—well, then, I guess I'll have to pay the price of my own folly."

"We haven't even begun to work yet," Peter assured him. "Nobody's done anything but dash around after you. There were other things that bothered me from the very first. Once you're safely parked in jail, I'm going out after them!" His tone was purposely light, but his face was grave. He held out his hand, and Earl grasped it. Their eyes met in a silent compact.

"There's just one thing," Earl said as they moved to the door. "I want you to keep Ruth out of this. Say that you found me alone—say I stole an automobile to get here, if you like. And they can beat me up or do anything else they like, but I'm not going to tell the police that Jake helped me to get away. I've hurt enough people already. Hereafter I'll handle my own dynamite."

"I hope we don't break a couple of necks getting down this road," Peter answered irrelevantly. But to himself he added: "There's nothing like a murder charge to add to a fellow's education. Earl Vincen't beginning to grow up."

CHAPTER XV

BARBARA handed the telephone to Peter. Her voice quivered with mischievous amusement as she cupped one hand over the transmitter.

"It's Mr. Sears," she warned him. "I think he's rather wild. He's been calling every half hour or so since the middle of the afternoon."

Peter, refreshed by a hot bath and lounging at ease in dressing gown and slippers, lazily reached for the instrument.

"Hello, Jimmy—this is Peter," he drawled in a tone of exaggerated ennui.

"What the hell——! Where have you been? Why didn't you come back to the office? Why haven't you phoned in? What about the handwriting on that note?" Jimmy Sputtered. The questions tumbled over one another in rapid succession.

"Oh, the handwriting?" Peter paused, as if striving to recall a half-forgotten detail. "The handwriting's Vincent's, all right."

"Then why didn't you come back and say so? What the devil did you think you went out for?" The wire fairly sizzled with Jimmy's wrathful impatience.

"Well, you see," Peter droned, "what I thought I went out for doesn't exactly cover it. No, I wouldn't say it covers it adequately at all. Because I got Earl Vincent."

"You got—— Say that again!"

"I've got Earl Vincent. In fact, he's here now, all tucked up nicely in bed in the guest room."

Peter grinned widely at the tribute of dead silence which greeted this announcement.

"My aunt—Maria!" Jimmy breathed. Jimmy swore with frequency and emphasis, but his mildest oath was reserved for the most extreme occasions. Peter listened to it now with pardonable triumph.

"I brought him home with me instead of to the police station, because there didn't seem any sense in giving it to the morning papers first. Barbara doesn't think anything at all of welcoming home her wandering husband, accompanied by an escaped murder suspect. A perfect hostess, is Mrs. Peter Piper." Peter's free arm gave Barbara's waist a delighted squeeze as she stood leaning over the arm of his chair.

"But look here! Do you mean to say the police don't know?"

"Not yet," Peter said soothingly. "I thought it was rather a cute idea to keep him for our ownest own till morning. I'll take a lot of pleasure in waking up Bert Graham a good deal earlier than he likes to be waked up, just to show him what hours he'd have to keep if he worked on an afternoon newspaper."

"It's a damn dangerous idea," Jimmy growled. "Have you got him tied up? Have you got somebody on guard to watch him?"

"I've got him tucked in under Barbara's best pink-silk eiderdown," Peter said in his most dulcet tones. "It's a lot nicer than jail."

"Well, God help us if he gets away again, and the police find it out. You're compounding a felony right now, young man."

"The police wouldn't have him at all if it weren't for us," Peter answered mildly. "I've reasons of my own for wanting to have a talk with Graham before the police pounce on Vincent as their white hope of solving the Luna murder.

Vincent's my little pet, and I'm not going to have him treated rough. That's that. The second thing is, that I want some sleep. I'll come down at the crack of dawn—some crack it'll be for Graham!—and clean up the whole story for the first run. Meanwhile, I'm going to plug up this telephone. Pleasant dreams!"

"Wait a minute! How did you find him? Where——"

Peter very gently hung up the receiver.

"Some day I'll bait Jimmy into committing a murder on his own account," he said as he set the instrument back on the table. "Too bad I'd be the corpse and couldn't cover the story."

Peter had not been actuated solely by deviltry in his refusal to give Jimmy an immediate account of the finding of Vincent. He had felt at the moment too tired to go over it all again—time enough for that in the morning. But when he tried to sleep, his mind could not be persuaded to loosen its hold on thought. It acknowledged fatigue only with a stubborn, detached alertness, a clarity that passed like a moving searchlight from one idea to another without connection but with weary, sterile repetition.

He tried to name the states of the Union in alphabetical order—a trick he had acquired while covering a national political convention and had found useful for insomnia. But the list of the states dissolved into a tabulation of the objects found in the cult headquarters, the evidence against Vincent, the things he must do in the morning before writing his story for an eight-o'clock dead line. It was like Alice trying to walk away from the Looking-Glass House and finding herself continually reëntering its doorway. A brief divagation into the profound psychology underlying Lewis Carroll's apparent nonsense almost slipped him over the borderline, but an inner jerk brought him wide awake again.

"Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michi-

gan . . ." He took up the states where he had left off for the sixth time. He had made himself responsible for finding an alternative suspect to Vincent, but the undertaking, as he viewed it with wide-open eyes in the darkness, seemed born of an overweening, vainglorious self-confidence which the facts and his own abilities were far from warranting.

If Vincent didn't do it, who did? Perhaps Vincent had done it after all. But there was something persistently psychopathic about the atmosphere of the Luna cult, and there was nothing in the least psychopathic about Vincent. Ah, but there you were! Perhaps that atmosphere pertained merely to Luna herself, and not to her murderer. If he did not succeed in uncovering another perpetrator, was the evidence against Vincent strong enough to convict him? Peter was aware of an acute distaste for seeing Vincent hanged or even sent to prison.

The boy had a positive genius for attracting loyal and quixotically devoted friends—Ruth, whom he had cast aside, but who carried her love like a banner, frank and unashamed, too high, too straight, too firm to be spattered by the mud of humiliation; Jake, who had engineered his friend's escape at the risk not only of his position but of his freedom—"I'll stand by you till hell freezes over!"; Captain Marquand, an old man whose long and honorable career might end in irremediable disaster—"I'm glad of what I did. I'd do it again." And now Peter himself was added to their company.

Whether Vincent had killed Luna or not, he was still the better person of the two. There was good stuff in the boy—good stuff beneath his emotional instability, his want of judgment, his impulsiveness; good stuff thrusting up strong shoots under the harsh winds of reality. Luna had very nearly wrecked Vincent during her life, and Peter found his sympathy for her death cooling to the zero point. He was pledged to get Vincent free if he could—but could he?

A murder charge was one thing, and the verdict upholding it was another. Was the evidence, as it stood, strong enough for conviction? Juries had a way of wanting to punish somebody for a murder, especially the murder of a beautiful woman. Peter had known them to demand payment from the prisoner in the dock, on evidence with conspicuous holes in it, in accordance with the logical procedure: "Somebody did it. There's nobody else in sight, so it must have been this one." If Vincent held firm in his resolution not to reveal the method of his escape from the boat, his reticence would tell against him. It would give color to the assumption that he was holding back other things as well. His assertion of innocence, of course, would carry no weight at all, and his explanation of the alias under which he had traveled was impossible to corroborate. One could hardly search the whole United States for a man named Smith!

It might be possible to find Basker—unless Basker had already got the wind up and made himself scarce, as he had had every chance of doing. But Basker, even if he could be found and induced to testify to Vincent's alibi, would make a weak, even a disastrous, witness. A professional criminal, a paroled convict, would be branded as unreliable at the start and Vincent's connection with him might well do him more harm than good in the eyes of the jury. "Birds of a feather," they would think—and Basker was a bird with very draggled plumage.

The evidence was purely circumstantial, of course, but a good prosecutor could make a strong cumulative case out of it—and Graham was a good prosecutor. The letters connected Vincent with Luna, and the gun, while not conclusive, tallied to a high degree of probability. But if it wasn't Vincent's gun that had fired the shot, another gun would have to be found. That other gun must exist some-

where—but where? In the dead hours of the night, Peter was forced to admit that he hadn't the slightest idea where to look for another example of that very common and cheap make of rifle, in the same general condition as Vincent's.

The left-handedness might help. Vincent was left-handed. Peter had checked that by allowing Earl to precede him to the door of Ruth's cabin in the hills. He had reached for the doorknob with his left hand. It was a telling point in the array of evidence against him, but, supposing Vincent to be innocent, it narrowed the further field of search. If Vincent had not killed Luna, then some other left-handed man had. The knife wound had also been made by a left-handed stroke.

The knife! Peter suddenly sat straight up in bed. The knife had not been found. The rifle was not susceptible of perfect identification, but there had been that case in Seattle, when a murderer, lying in ambush, had whittled a stick while waiting for his victim. Kurtner, the miscroscope expert, had testified that the blade of a knife left marks as individual as the rifling of a pistol, as the fingerprints of a hand. By the knife found in his pocket, Kurtner had identified the criminal.

Peter slipped quietly out of bed and felt his way to the closet. That smoothly whittled stick, tapering to a point, which he had picked up from the floor on the morning after the murder—he had not thought of it since. Vincent's escape had focused attention in one direction to the exclusion of all others. If it had fallen out of his pocket, he would not even have missed it.

In itself, it was insignificant—a mere sliver, not even shaped for any discernible purpose. But the man who had waited for his victim in the bushes had whittled idly, from habit, throwing the stick away—and that meaningless habit had fitted a noose around his neck. Peter suppressed an

exclamation of triumph as his groping fingers fastened on the slender bit of wood it had caught in the lining of his pocket.

Perhaps it had no connection with the murder. Perhaps Vincent himself had the whittling habit. But no, the room where Peter had met Luna was scrupulously neat. If Vincent had been telling the truth when he said that he had not visited her for several days, then someone else—a man with a knife—had left behind him a means by which that knife could be conclusively identified.

They all existed somewhere—the other rifle, the knife, the green and red bathrobe minus its cord—all belonging to a left-handed man with the habit of whittling. But Peter, standing in his bare feet by the closet door, twirling the bit of wood in his fingers, had not the faintest notion who the man might be or where any of these missing objects could be found. "I'm going at it the wrong end to," he suddenly decided. "I can't very well go rambling the streets expecting to bump into a man in a bathrobe with a knife in one hand and a gun in the other. The field's too wide. The left-handedness narrows it, but not nearly enough. The thing for you to do, Peter Piper, is to quit worrying about the clues the murderer left behind him, and see what clues were left by Luna herself. The more I can find out about Luna, the better chance I'll have to know something about the man who killed her. Somewhere in her life was the thing that led to her death."

To go back to bed and face the rest of the night with those unanswered questions hammering at his mind was intolerable.

"The only way to get any sleep at all is to get it out of my system," Peter muttered. "Too bad for Vincent, but it can't be helped."

Peter's light tap on the guest-room door, however, was answered with a promptness which showed that Vincent

had also been struggling with wakeful hours. Peter switched on the light as he entered and settled himself comfortably on the foot of the bed.

"I'm yearning for conversation," he announced. "First of all, and just to clear the air, do you make a habit of whittling?"

CHAPTER XVI

"WHITTLING?" Vincent lifted a tousled head from the pillow and stared at Peter as if he suspected his nocturnal visitor of talking in his sleep. "Whittling? Why, no. Whatever made you think I did?"

Peter left the question unanswered.

"I don't believe a woman ever makes a practice of whittling. They don't carry knives about, for one thing. I guess we can leave the women out," he mused aloud. "Do you happen to know any men who whittle? I don't mean sharpening pencils or making whistles or anything like that—but anyone who is likely to pick up a stray stick and smooth it off and then drop it?"

"No, I don't," Vincent answered after a thoughtful pause. "I suppose you know what you're talking about—but it doesn't make much sense to me!"

"Maybe it doesn't make any sense—I don't know." Peter dropped the sliver of wood into his pajama pocket. Perhaps he had made a mistake in mentioning it to Vincent at all. If Earl himself happened to be the man who had left the tell-tale sliver behind him, he would henceforth be on his guard. He wouldn't do any more absent-minded whittling in the future. Still, beginning with to-morrow morning, he'd be in jail. Peter made a mental note to inquire whether Vincent's belongings, as they would be listed in the property clerk's office, included a pocket knife.

"How much did you know about Luna—besides being in love with her?" he asked suddenly.

"Do we—have to go into all that?" Earl flinched as if the question evoked pain so acute as to be almost physical.

"I'm afraid we do," Peter insisted firmly. "You've given me a pretty tough job—or at least I've taken it on—and I need all the help you can give me. After to-night I won't have much chance to talk to you in private. I've got to do my durnedest to find Luna's murderer, and somewhere or other there's a signpost to tell me where to look."

"I've no more idea than you have who did it," Vincent spoke positively. Meeting the eyes raised almost defiantly to his, Peter wondered if the tone had not been a little too emphatic, forcibly denying a reservation, or a doubt, which he wished to suppress.

"Of course you haven't," he agreed easily. "But my idea is that the signpost I'm looking for lies somewhere in Luna's own life. People don't go around committing murders just for fun. I saw Luna only once, but I saw enough of her to recognize an extraordinary personality. If I understood her character better, I might pick up something to help. The way a life ends isn't accidental. It has to follow, somehow, on the form that life has taken."

Vincent nodded.

"You're right there," he said. "Terrible as it is, there's a ghastly appropriateness in it. The mystery, the violence. Luna was not like anyone else. She wouldn't even die like anyone else." The words were solemnly spoken, but there was a bitter cynicism in the twisted smile that accompanied them.

"You didn't actually believe in all that witchcraft dope, did you? Somehow I can't see you going in for black magic," Peter remarked.

Vincent flung himself back against the pillows.

"I don't know why I should think I ought to be polite about her because she's dead," he said with sudden resolution. "Goodness knows, I didn't admire her. I even had the

crazy idea that I could save her, if she'd let me. I wasn't blind. I hadn't any illusions—except the one illusion that I—I, a perfectly ordinary kid—could influence a woman like Luna and make her over. I wasn't such a fool, either. I could see that the influence was all the other way, that it was she who was tearing my life to bits. But I kept on trying. You can call that magic, if you want to. If it was, it was black magic, all right."

The pathetic simplicity of it brought a smile to Peter's lips. Vincent, caught by the undercurrents of that powerful personality, had been helpless as a skiff in a whirlpool. And he had imagined that the skiff, wrenched about by the force of those concentric circles, could transform the whirlpool into a straight and limpid stream.

"You wanted to persuade Luna to become the nice, ordinary wife of a nice, ordinary young man? It sounds like an undertaking of somewhat staggering magnitude!"

To Peter's surprise, Vincent responded to his smile with a half-shamefaced but wholly natural laugh.

"You know, now that the first shock of her death is past, I can see myself how absurd it was! Perhaps, if she were alive again, I'd be as helpless as ever. But now—well, I feel like somebody waking up from a long spell of delirium, waking up, weak but sane. It sounds funny when I'm on my way to jail accused of murder, but the way I feel inside is—free. As if I'd escaped from something outside myself that had hold of me. I can see just how crazy I was, to think I could take her out of her world into mine."

"Do you think it was just a pose—the cult business?" Peter asked the question, not so much for what he could learn concerning Luna as for what the answer would reveal of Vincent's own character and knowledge.

Vincent considered the question carefully.

"On the surface it was. It was a means of making money out of fools—and the money itself didn't matter so much as

the sense of power it gave her. She glorified in the consciousness of other people's weakness. She glorified in it so much that she could not see that dupes can be dangerous. And yet—it wasn't all acting. She'd laugh at them, but there was something behind her laughter, something uneasy. The nearest I can come to it is to say that I think she really believed in some personified force of evil. She thought she had deliberately placed herself on the devil's side and had sold her soul for power. Under all the hocus-pocus, she made you feel that there was something dark and stupendous and real. I may be mistaken, perhaps she was just fooling me too, when I had those glimpses. But I think if there was any bedrock of the genuine about her, it was there. It was a kind of self-justification, you see. She'd paid the price to get what she wanted, and it gave her the untrammeled right to go after it—to play the fools to the top of her bent."

"Um-hum," Peter grunted a thoughtful assent. "A pretty good blanket dispensation for conscience. She'd put herself on the side of evil and had a free hand thereafter. Neat solution to the conflict of an ingrained religious temperament and an ego that wanted to sit on top of the world and ride rough shod over anybody in the way. She was bound to find a way to reconcile them somehow, because both of them were equally real. She'd have made a great actress, or a grand courtesan, or a politician, if the way had been open to get power in those ways. Being the daughter of an impoverished preacher, she had to cut her channel where she could. But I'm a little surprised that the poor simps who believed in her as an authentic witch gave her enough scope."

"They didn't." Vincent caught his breath sharply as if he regretted the hasty words.

Peter waited, his cocked eyebrow a silent interrogation.

"Look here, Son," he said at last, with a paternal air that consorted oddly with his youthful face; "you've been nicely brought up not to say unpleasant things about ladies—even

ladies who think they've sold their souls to the devil. But this is a murder, and murder isn't a polite occupation."

"But it's only guesswork. I'm not certain——"

"This isn't the witness stand, and hearsay testimony is allowed. If nothing comes of it, I'll keep it strictly to myself—you can depend on that," Peter urged.

"It sounds as if I were trying to get myself out of a jam by throwing mud on somebody else. It's only suspicion, anyhow. That's understood?"

"Perfectly." Not many men under the charge of murder, Peter reflected, would be so hesitant about throwing suspicion on others. It might be, of course, that Vincent knew his suspicions could not point to the real murderer. But looking into the frank, ingenuous face which appeared even more boyish than usual beneath the tousled, sleep-rumpled hair, Peter was inclined to view with disapproval his own excess of skepticism.

"Luna was married, you know," Vincent said. "At least she told me so. Perhaps it wasn't true—I can't say for sure. I think she told me as a means of getting rid of me when I wouldn't quit urging her to give it all up and marry me. She and her husband were separated, but they still met. I wanted her to break with him entirely and get a divorce. But she laughed at that. She said their relations were purely of a business nature, but that the business partnership was not of a nature to be aired in the divorce courts."

"Have you any idea what the business was?"

"I couldn't say."

"You mean you don't know?" Peter pounced on the ambiguity of the answer.

"I don't know, but I have an idea, without a shadow of proof, that it was something illegal. And there was danger in it—the kind of danger she loved to meet with her contempt for weakness. There are other kinds of weaklings than the poor fools who are taken in by weird cults. Hon-

estly, if I had anything to go on, I'd tell you. But whatever it was, it was diabolical—quite as diabolical as her devil-worship. And it brought her money, plenty of it, and the power over others that she craved above everything else."

"I'm beginning to be interested in this mysterious husband," Peter remarked.

"She might have made it all up. She made you believe anything—anything at all—while you were with her. But afterwards, you wondered——"

"I'm inclined to think he's real enough," Peter said. "At least, a man who might fill the bill is indicated, if the bank book found in the wooden chest means anything. I don't suppose you know whether this husband reduced to the status of a business partner was still in love with her?"

"If he was, he had plenty of company," Vincent said with a rueful smile. "There were other men, I know. She—she could make a man feel utterly sure that she loved him. And then—" he stammered painfully on, "I don't know whether it was pride or whether she delighted in the torment she could cause, but she told me that it was silly of me to keep after her to marry me because I—I was only one of many. I know I make her sound like a rather horrible person. She wasn't really. She could cast a sort of glory over—even that."

All his wounded idealism, his young, tortured bewilderment, quivered in Vincent's voice.

"I know that Luna was a very fascinating person indeed, even when she was not trying to exert herself," Peter said. "I can quite see that she'd make almost anything glamorous. Do you know, I'm beginning to feel rather sorry for her."

"Sorry for her!" Luna as an object of pity was obviously a novel and astonishing conception to Vincent.

"Well, you see," Peter explained, "she couldn't have a very easy time of it. She'd been brought up to think that

love was wicked, and so, of course, she plunged into it with all its most lurid implications. I don't suppose she ever in her life knew how a person sincerely in love feels. She does seem to have done everything she could think of to get rid of you in the end. That's one thing to her credit. She knew she wasn't doing you any good, and she did have a prick of conscience about it. What she couldn't realize is that you can't turn love on and off like a faucet. After all, there were plenty of forces that Luna, for all her fascinations, couldn't control."

"You don't think it shows there must have been something wrong with me, something that cuts me off from—from decent people, that I could feel as I did?" Earl asked wistfully.

"You're not the first moth to be singed in a flame," Peter answered flippantly. "Your idea of reforming Luna, when I think of the two of you, is about the damnedest piece of romantic quixotism I've ever encountered. But don't you go around getting soul storms over it. There isn't time. Check it off as a mighty expensive bit of experience. You've helped me a lot to-night, so I'll give you that piece of advice in return, free gratis."

"I don't see that I've helped any. It all looks as complicated as ever," Earl protested.

"More so," Peter asserted with emphasis. "That's what cheers me up. I'm getting a grasp on how complicated it really is. You said that dupes can be dangerous. One of them certainly was. But which kind of dupe was it? It might have been a disgruntled member of the colony who undertook a bit of diabolism on his own account. It might have been a man—the husband or somebody else—who protested with a rifle bullet and a knife stab against her way of flaunting her love affairs to watch the victims wriggle. And it might have been somebody connected with this dark business partnership, which isn't going to remain dark forever,

if I can help it. You've given me plenty to think about, young man; and just to show my gratitude, I'm not going to think about any of it. I'm going back to bed and to sleep."

Peter yawned prodigiously and swung his feet to the floor.

"You're lucky," he added from the doorway. "I won't wake you up in the morning until after I've seen the district attorney. And won't he be surprised when I dig him out in the dewy dawn? He doesn't know what a speech he's in for —not yet."

CHAPTER XVII

EVEN at the outlandish hour of six o'clock in the morning, Graham, descending the stairs in dressing gown and slippers, contrived to look incorrigibly neat. The faint fragrance of a very good shaving cream still lingered about him, and his crisp blond hair retained its dampness from the shower.

Peter viewed the approaching figure with irritation. Peter had overslept the alarm clock and had dressed in six minutes flat, with no time for shaving. He had jerked a button from his waistcoat in his haste, and had flung himself into a coat which bore no sartorial relation to his trousers. His black hair stood out at all angles, where he had ruffled it in his annoyance at the quarter of an hour during which he had been kept waiting. His impatience had mounted to fury at the sound of the shower that reached his ears from somewhere above.

"My God!" he greeted Graham tempestuously. "If you caught a murderer red-handed, you'd stop and take a Turkish bath before you ran after him!"

"Oh, no, not a Turkish one—you newspaper men always do exaggerate." Graham's smile was more cheerful than any man's smile has a right to be at six o'clock in the morning. "I'm paying you a tribute, and you're unappreciative, as usual. That's the gratitude of the press! I thought you must have something important on your mind, when you yanked me up at this hour of the morning, and I was afraid if I didn't shave before I found out what it was, you'd rush me around so fast I wouldn't get a chance the rest of the day.

You can't very well make me leave the house without my clothes, so I trusted I'd be allowed to get dressed. But as for shaving, I wasn't taking any chances!"

"Important!" Peter hoped his pause was properly impressive. "The representative of the *Evening Herald* has found Earl Vincent, that's all."

"You've found Vincent? Where is he? Wait a shake—I'll be with you in five minutes."

Graham was halfway up the stairs, three steps at a time, when Peter's voice recalled him.

"I'm not missing any dead line waiting for you to adjust your necktie," he said sternly. "If you want to hear anything about Vincent, you come right down here and listen to it now. There's plenty of time. I've parked him where he won't get away."

"There's just one thing I want to hear. Where is he?" Graham paused in his upward flight to lean over the bannister. "I can read all about the glory of the *Herald* in the paper. It's my job to get him before you guys have interviewed him and put a lot of ideas into his head."

"Well," Peter reminded him maliciously, "you can't go and get him till I tell you where he is, can you? And I'm not going to tell you till you've agreed to certain conditions."

"This is no time for fooling, Peter. If you've caught a murderer, it has something to do with the administration of justice. It isn't just a scoop for your precious paper. I'm talking to you now as the district attorney of this county. If you know where Vincent is, you'll tell me, and tell me quick, with no strings tied to it."

"I didn't say I caught the murderer," Peter corrected him mildly.

"You said——"

"That I'd found Vincent, who's set you all off half cocked so that you can't see anybody else in the picture."

"That's good enough—for the moment," Graham answered grimly.

"Well, I'm warning you for your own good. Don't be too sure. Don't you give out any press statements that the case is solved. They may make you look very silly later on. The statement I want you to give out to all the boys is that Vincent gave himself up of his own free will. It happens to be true. He was all ready to hand himself over to the police when I found him last night."

"Last night! Then what kept him? What's he been doing all this time?"

"I persuaded him to wait," Peter said in his most dulcet tones. "I made him see that the police had no right at all to get him in time for the morning papers."

Graham lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"I give up," he said resignedly. "You capture a murderer, and instead of turning him over to the authorities, you——"

"If you call him a murderer again I'll spirit him away and swear I never laid eyes on him!" Peter flared. "That's what I'm getting at. You public officials seem capable of holding only one idea at a time."

"Thereby differing, of course, from Mr. Peter Piper," Graham retorted with pointed sarcasm. "If you caught a murderer in the act, you'd ask him please to hurry up with it so you could catch an edition."

"Well, I've got to catch an edition now, all right. And there's just one thing I want to do first. I want you to promise that there won't be any hammering on Vincent to get a confession out of him. That's the condition on which I produce him—that you tell the police the third-degree business, direct or indirect, is absolutely out."

Graham stood motionless on the step, his keen gaze fixed on Peter's upturned face.

"You've a reason for that request, Peter," he said gravely.

"I have, and this is it. You could break that boy in three days—break him so he'd confess he'd murdered his maiden aunt who isn't even dead. And where would it get you? The case would be gummed up worse than it is now, which is saying a good deal. You'd lose every bit of good he may be to you."

"You have reason to think someone else did it?" Graham prodded.

"I don't know." Peter lifted candid and troubled eyes to the face above him. "But I've made myself sort of responsible for finding out. I'm going to find out, or bust myself trying! But if that boy was badgered into a confession, and the confession turned out to be phoney, it would look mighty bad for somebody."

"And if it wasn't—phoney?"

"Then, if the time ever comes that I come to you and say I'm convinced he did it, but can't scrape up enough proof to take to a jury, you may tell the cops the lid's off and they may go as far as they like in questioning him. Until then, mark my words, you'll get more out of him by soothing his fears and letting him alone. I've talked to him, and I know."

"You seem pretty certain——"

"I'm anything else *but,*" Peter contradicted. "Look here, Bert. I dug up Mrs. Claypool's body and gave you a proper *corpus delicti*—and it was the right body. Now I've dug up the suspect you want—but I'm not at all sure it's the right suspect. I want to have a chance to look further without having a confession sprung on me that will make the office think I'm just fooling around to get out of work."

"Meanwhile this man you want wrapped in cotton wool will sit peacefully in jail, with plenty of time to work up a story he can stick to like a postage stamp," Graham remarked satirically. "He's proved himself pretty smart in giving us the slip twice already."

"He's either so smart that he's clear out of reach of ordi-

nary guys like you and me and is about six moves ahead of the game no matter how we play it, in which case strong-arm methods wouldn't reach him anyhow, or—he isn't," Peter ended weakly. "Wait till you see him."

"I'm still waiting," Graham reminded him pointedly.

"Well, will you play it my way? Will you give me a chance?" Peter pleaded.

"You've got something on your mind—and sometimes your brain storms have been known to work," Graham conceded. "But if we let him alone, and then the whole case fizzles out, heaven help you! I'll admit we may have put all our eggs in one basket, but I've yet to be shown any other basket."

"It may be a simple love murder—and then again it mayn't. And if it is, the lady was involved with more than one man. You can't say she led a double life. It was at least a triple one, and maybe you could multiply it a bit further. Those cultists, for instance. I don't suppose you let them fade out of your consciousness altogether, just because Vincent led you a chase."

"No, we didn't," Graham said drily. "The police rounded them up and questioned all of them—there aren't very many living at the place—but there wasn't a shred of evidence against any of them. They couldn't even be held as material witnesses."

"I'd like to have heard that questioning!" Peter snorted. "The average cop knows such a lot about borderline psychopaths."

"They may not have studied abnormal psychology, but they know evidence when they see it—and there wasn't any. That's that." There were times when Graham took a wicked pleasure in snubbing the over-confident Peter.

"I suppose they didn't get anything more out of the guard, either," Peter continued, unabashed.

"There wasn't anything to get. Since you're so fond of

psychology, you might take his I. Q. I fancy he wouldn't rate very high."

"No?" Peter, remembering his encounter with the negro on the afternoon before Luna's death, permitted himself to wonder whether Jackson had not found stupidity the best of all possible armors against inquisition.

"He's blind, so he wouldn't be much help at making an identification even if he'd heard anything. And he didn't. He sticks to his story that he slept through the night, and there's no reason to disbelieve him."

Peter debated whether he should mention the suspicion which had formed in his mind to the nature of Luna's business partnership with her husband, and decided against it. There was no use in giving away a tip where the other papers might pick it up before he had time to follow it himself. He wondered if that tip had already reached the police through the bank book, and ventured a casual question.

"Has anybody looked up Anthony?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, he's the woman's husband, all right. When she got hipped on this cult idea, she left him. They've been separated for two years. But it was a friendly separation, and he kept her supplied with money—left their joint account open. He's a retired capitalist, with plenty of cash. He's offered a $5,000 reward for the apprehension of her murderer, by the way."

"You tempt me to hope that Vincent did it, after all," Peter grinned. "I don't suppose you've had any more visits from Tanner?"

"I haven't. And just to show you we haven't neglected everybody else for Vincent, I'll tell you we've posted his description and the police are on the look-out for him."

"Posted his description! He's gone, then?"

"He hasn't been seen, so far as I can find out, since he left my office a week ago. But that doesn't mean much. We're just looking for him as a general precaution. A man would

hardly come in here raising assorted cain, just to make sure we knew he had a grievance, and then go out and murder the woman. Besides, there wasn't robbery, and what he wanted was his money back."

"So he did," Peter mused. "Anyway, there's no use wasting much thought on him till he turns up. *I'm* not going out to hunt for him. I've done my good deed already by bringing in Vincent."

"Only you haven't brought him in."

"I leave that to you. Good Lord, I will have to leave it to you, for a fact! Jimmy will be sitting on one ear—I've got to beat it to make the first run!" Peter looked at his watch and had already dashed halfway to the door before he turned.

"I've got to give the *Herald* credit for finding him, but I'll say you took him in custody and got his statement—the statement he gave me last night. I'll even say you rushed out to the call of duty in your pajamas, if you like."

"I don't give a hoot what you say. Where is he?"

"He's at my house, eating breakfast with Barbara!"

And with that as a parting shot, Peter slammed the front door behind him. His whistle pierced the morning air in a series of melancholy hoots as he sent the rattling Bossy hurtling from the side of the curb.

CHAPTER XVIII

"IT'S A CLEAN-UP!" Jimmy chanted the words as if they were a *Te deum*. "Exclusive art—Vincent giving himself up to the district attorney—exclusive everything. The rest of them all cooling their heels at the jail, and Vincent sitting tight refusing to be interviewed. I suppose," he sighed regretfully, "the story's dead now till he comes up for trial. But it sure was a grand killing." Jimmy prodded a sheet of copy paper with a blunt pencil point for a moment, then looked up with the light of a new inspiration in his eye.

"I tell you what you do, Peter. Take a camera man and go up to that shack, wherever it is, and get a picture of it. It'll make a follow story for to-morrow, and keep it alive one more day, anyhow."

"Jimmy," Peter leaned across the city editor's desk and spoke with oracular solemnity, "you're all wet—simply soaked in dampness, in fact. This story isn't dead, even temporarily. It's just beginning to sit up and take nourishment. There are angles to it—angles and angles. And while the other reporters are all enjoying the lull and concentrating on Vincent, I'll be out angling the angles—a regular complete angler I'll be. I don't want to stick my nose into the jail if I can help it. There's no use having the beat men phone their offices that the *Herald* is up to something sniffish. Let them think we've dropped it and are sitting on our laurels."

"You don't sit on laurels," Jimmy, who was somewhat of a purist, interjected.

"We don't have to," Peter persisted. "I've got a go-between to keep me in touch with Vincent, when the re-

porters are all nicely out of the way. I don't believe I mentioned it, but there was a girl at that shack."

"A girl! And you left her out of your story?" Jimmy's green celluloid eye-shade was thrust violently upward. "Hell's bells!" he exclaimed in a voice of stricken horror. "What did you do that for?"

"Because we can spring her whenever it's necessary. Because she'll do anything in the world to help Vincent and she may be a darn useful helper if she isn't being watched by every newspaper man in town."

"Yes, and while we're holding off, how do you know they won't find her on their own and leave us twiddling our thumbs?" Jimmy inquired with withering scorn.

"Because Barbara's already kidnaped her for us."

"Your wife—kidnaped her?"

"Nice girl, Barbara." Peter's tone was pensive. "Always taking in lame ducks. Not that Ruth is a lame duck, far from it. But she telephoned down this morning for news, and Barbara felt sorry for her, away off in the wilds by herself and worried to death, so she invited her to come down to the house and stay. I couldn't have pried that girl loose with a pickax, but Barbara did it, just like that. She gave me a ring at the office to tell me about it and ask if I would mind. Mind! It means we've got that girl for our ownest own. Barbara can spot a newspaper man a block off. Even if they got wind of her, they'd get to her only over Barbara's dead body."

Jimmy drew his eye-shade forward again and fixed his gaze with concentrated attention on the paste pot. Peter waited in silence, for these were the signs of Jimmy's deepest cogitation.

"You seem to have rather an elaborate campaign mapped out," he observed at length. "If I take you off everything else to work on it, we'll be left pretty short-handed. Are you sure it's worth it?"

"I'm sure it isn't as simple as it looks," Peter said soberly. "I've got information from Vincent that is worth looking into. And I've got the jump on the other guys in all directions. This story is not only going to be kept alive—the Luna murder mystery will look like the great *Herald* serial, or my name is mud!"

"Oh, well, run along." Jimmy met Peter's enthusiasm with weary resignation. "But if the story doesn't stand up, God help you!"

It was the second time that day that Peter had been offered this challenge. He seemed to have become involved in rash promises to any number of people—first to Luna, who had appealed to him to understand her hidden fear; then to Vincent, accused of her murder, and to Ruth, whose faith was a shining light of valor. He had promised Vincent that he should not be hounded into making a confession, and Graham that the mystery could be solved without it. And now Jimmy. They all wanted different things—and Peter had blithely undertaken to satisfy them all.

"It looks as if I'll have to produce something—even if I have to confess to the murder myself!" he said, more to himself than to Jimmy. "Oh, well, 'my head is bloody but unbowed.'"

"You're darn right it'll be bloody if you whistle on your way out!" Jimmy warned him. "You're worse than a couple of cats and a fire siren."

Peter disdained to reply. In fact, his thoughts were already far away. He was wondering whether Albert Jackson had indeed told the police all he knew, and if he hadn't, what would be the best way to find out.

When he reached the gates leading to the collection of cottages that formed the Luna Colony, he found them standing open—a mute recognition that the mystery with which Luna had surrounded her activities in life had yielded to the mystery of her death. Jackson, however, still occupied his

lodge by the roadside, and came out at the sound of Peter's car.

"I think you will know me," Peter said, advancing and standing where the old negro could touch his face with rapid, sensitive fingers.

"Yes, sir, you're the gentleman that's been here once before. Some folks think I ain't got no sense because I'm blind. You know better."

Peter beamed with gratification at the success of his implied flattery. The old man had his pride. No wonder he had retreated behind a wall of sullen silence when it was assumed that an old blind negro must be without gifts, ignorant and negligible.

"There are lots of things folks don't understand," he said. "And they think if they don't understand something, it can't happen. They think they're mighty smart, but they don't know what you and I know."

"You're right, boss. There's more things in this here heaven and earth than they've got any dreams of. They're smart, all right. Too smart to see what's right under their noses, they are."

Peter barely restrained an audible chortle at this surprising evocation of Shakespeare. Somewhere the old man had heard the threadbare quotation and had treasured it as a vindication of his faith.

"They have eyes, and see not," Peter intoned solemnly. "But you, without any eyes, can see things they miss. You know there are powers that work in the darkness. Sooner or later, Old Man Trouble was bound to get hold of Luna —isn't that so?"

"That's so—that's so." The huge grizzled head nodded. "You can't make a bargain with the devil without he'll come around for payment. Luna, she thought she had the best of the devil. He gave her the spells that'd make folks follow

her to the ends of the earth, and do whatever she told 'em. But he came after her in the end. He claimed his own."

The powerful sincerity and simplicity of the old man's creed were curiously impressive. Whatever tortuous, twisted backturnings of the stream of civilization might be responsible for the rest of Luna's following, here was a clear and primitive philosophy, working within its limits in a straight line of intelligence. With all his cynicism, his panoply of psychological analysis, his familiarity with the machinery of justice which took no account of satanic visitations, Peter viewed the old man with respect. There was a sense in which Luna had indeed made a bargain with life, a bargain which released her from the restrictions of her fellows—and had paid.

"Do you think," he asked seriously, "that it was Satan himself who came for her?"

"Satan was her master, and Satan, he got her. But I've lived a long time, and I've seen that Satan most generally works through folks. The devil knows how to fix things so they'll look natural, and fool the smart folks into thinking he ain't in it at all. Maybe the man—or it might have been a woman—that took Luna's soul back to the master she'd sold it to didn't even know that it was Old Man Satan working in him, whispering in his ear, telling him what to do and how to do it, but it was.

"I'm only a poor old man, and the devil, he's powerful smart, but I'm not going to let him get away with it—not if I can help it! He took the grandest lady in the world, and he gave her the black power of magic and the sinful power of pride, and he took her soul. Do you think those policemen, stamping around asking questions, know how to fight the devil? They don't know nothing about it. I don't know who the devil spoke to with his black voice the night he took Luna, but if I can just get a notion of him, old Satan will find out there's them that can fight him!"

Jackson's huge fists were clenched at his sides and his gnarled figure, distorted by work and age as a tree is twisted by a century of storms, towered in cosmic defiance. The years had scored his face with wrinkles like the canyons on a mountainside. His blind face was lifted to the unseeing sky.

Peter had lost all impulse to laugh. The old man believed in the power of evil, potent over life and death. He believed in the malign intelligence that bartered for souls and snatched them to their doom. He believed in spells that could waste him away with mortal sickness beyond human skill to define or conquer. He believed with a faith that was old before modern science was born and that endured with a persistent subterranean life, assured, indifferent, while men scratched the surface of the universe with their pin pricks of knowledge. And yet, believing, he had challenged those forces of evil. Ignorant, old, helpless before the supernatural cunning of his adversary, he would fight the devil!

Peter's quick imagination caught fire at the spectacle of such monumental courage. His voice trembled with the stress of genuine feeling as he reached for the blind man's hand and gripped it in his own.

"I'm with you," he said earnestly. "We'll hunt him out, if he's this side of hell!"

"You don't think I'm foolish, like those policemen, just because I ain't got the smartness and the learning of this world," Jackson said more calmly. "I can talk to you, knowing you wouldn't twist my words around to something different. You've got eyes, and you're young and strong. I can't do nothing but sit there—but I ain't been just sitting here doing nothing. No, I surely ain't. The police said they couldn't hold 'em here. But I've held 'em!"

"Good!" Peter fairly shouted the word in his enthusiasm. "You mean you've got the colonists to stick around. However did you do it?"

"There ain't many that stayed here regular," Jackson explained. "Most of them came to Luna to get her to make a charm, for love, maybe, or sickness, or to get back at folks they had a grudge on. There was just a few she let live in the cabins. There was a crowd always came on the night of the full moon—a 'coven,' she called it, out of one of them books of old-time spells she was always reading. They said the Black Mass then, in a clearing back in the hills. But it wasn't one of them that got her, because the full moon wasn't till after that."

"But the police didn't find anything against those who were here. That's why they were released," Peter reminded him.

"Would they know how to look?" Jackson's face wrinkled in a grimace of concentrated scorn. "I don't say it was one of them. I don't know. But I sat here praying that somebody would come along who would know the devil's work when he sees it, and would know how to look."

"Well, you did a mighty good job to keep them," Peter said gratefully.

"I made 'em so they was scared to leave," Jackson announced calmly. "I told 'em that them that had nothing to be afraid of had better stay. If anybody left, I said, there wouldn't be a road of the world long enough, nor a hole deep enough, that I wouldn't see he was followed to it, because he'd be pointing the finger of suspicion right at himself by going. If they was innocent, they wouldn't be afraid to stay. And if they was guilty, they'd be afraid to go. They knew the police had given up the idea of finding out anything about the murder from them, so if there was anything to hide, they'd figure they was safe enough."

"By Jiminy!" Peter exclaimed in tones of admiring awe. "You certainly worked some slick psychology."

"That ain't psychology—that's plain horse sense, helped

out with prayer. I prayed the Lord would send somebody to help me get the best of the devil. And He did."

Peter had never before been hailed as a direct answer to prayer. It was rather an exacting rôle to live up to without previous practice, he reflected, but he'd try not to be too inadequate.

"You go in and take a look around, then come back and tell me what you find. That way I'll know whether you're the one that was sent."

"I'll do my best." To his surprise, Peter felt oddly and sincerely humble. It did not even occur to him as strange that he, the hard-boiled and aggressively modern reporter on the *Evening Herald,* should accept his orders for the day from un uneducated negro gatekeeper who seriously believed in witchcraft.

CHAPTER XIX

PETER walked cautiously up the path, making his progress as nearly noiseless as possible. He had no desire to advertise his visit as yet, and he was glad that no one else in the little community would have the quick, trained ears of the blind man. Luna's cottage, he hoped, would not have been locked after the removal of her body—certainly it would not be guarded, at least, and access by door or, failing that, by window should be comparatively easy.

Peter was not worried about his own means of entrance; it would be far from the first empty house that he had broken into. But he hoped that whoever had been there on the night of Luna's death, her murderer or someone else with an interest in or knowledge of her many-faceted life and its violent end, might have been tempted to return. Before interviewing the little group of witchcraft adherents, Peter was curious to know whether anyone had had reason to revisit the cottage, and had left any sign of his presence behind.

There might be a number of motives for such a visit—the desire to find out what clues the police had discovered and taken away with them; the haunting, harrowing anxiety lest some evidence of the murderer's identity had been left behind him; perhaps a search for something pertaining to a phase of her life not connected with the murder but not to be left in the hands of the police if it could be prevented.

Peter had no expectation of picking up any clues that had passed unnoticed in the former search of the rooms.

What he did hope to find was a change, however minute; for the slightest change would be of immense significance in showing that someone vitally interested in at least one of the mutiple strands of mystery in which Luna's life and death were entangled was still in the neighborhood and had reason to feel anxious. If anyone had been there, he was extremely likely to have left some trace of his presence. In the first place, he would not expect the house to be minutely searched again. In the second place, Peter opined with his chin set in a grim line of determination, if so much as a pin had been moved since he had left with Oleson and Hames, he would know it!

He expected to find the house empty, and only an automatic continuance of the caution that had led him to walk softly on the edge of the path led him to try the front door with a slow, silent movement of the knob. It gave readily at his touch, and swung noiselessly open. Peter blinked to accustom his eyes to the dimness of the interior. The house was so closely set against the trees that the room was badly lighted—Peter remembered that it had taken him a few seconds to see details clearly when he had entered it before. In another moment, however, he realized that the room was much darker than he had remembered it. His eyes swung instinctively to the windows, and his throat felt suddenly tight with excitement. The curtains had been drawn completely across the window panes—those windows which had been uncovered on the morning after the murder.

Neither Oleson nor Hames nor himself had drawn those curtains. There was no reason to do so—they had needed all the light they could get. Moreover, Peter remembered how he had stood outside with Oleson and looked from the side window directly across the room when the policeman had found the scratch from the rifle barrel on the sill. That was after they had left the house, and none of them had returned to it. It was true, then—someone had come back!

And whoever that someone was, it could not have been Vincent—even though, Peter forced himself to admit against the pounding pulses of his desire, it might also not have been the murderer.

He stepped quietly into the room, closing the door gently, and looked about him. Then for one mad instant something jerked upward into his throat and caught at his breath. In that instant Peter knew the surge of the dark subterranean waters of the mind, flowing black and still, hidden and unrecognized, deep and unrecognized, deeper than reason, denied by reason. Peter, to whom superstition was as remote and unreal as the totems of the savages, felt the sweat break out on the palms of his hands. For the marble bench was not flat and white. The outline of the bench where Luna's body had lain, and from which it had been removed, was a curving mound—just such a mound as it had been on Tuesday morning, when Peter had blinked his eyes in the doorway and then had crossed the room to stand beside her body.

His breath eased from him in a tremulous sigh. As if at the signal of his breath, his mind resumed control. He crossed the room in three long strides, and stood by the bench that had been Luna's bier. It was covered with a mound of flowering acacia boughs. The blossoms were still fresh and fragrant under the white plaque of Joan of Arc, the saint whom Luna had called a witch, and the black carving of nameless malignity.

Peter wiped his damp hands methodically on his handkerchief. He stood motionless, his face flushed with the hot stab of anger that follows as a vindictive protest against the cause of unjustified fear. Then he reached down and touched the leaves, some of them still damp from the morning fog. Someone had not only been there, but had been there very recently, a full week after the murder.

A sound, the faint swish of a body shifting its position

—a sound that would have been inaudible save for the dense quiet of the room—caught suddenly at his senses, strained to hyper-acuteness by excitement and his recent emotional tension. Someone was there now, in the back room, hiding! There was no further need for caution—the sound of his footsteps crossing the room in the moment when he had forgotten all else except the shape on the bench could easily have been heard by anyone in the little house.

In his shamed anger against the unknown who was responsible for his moment of blind panic, it did not even cross Peter's mind that he was unarmed and alone in the house, in all probability, with a murderer, and might properly find the situation somewhat intimidating. He walked briskly to the connecting door of the bedroom, which stood half open, and flung it wide.

"Come out of that!" he demanded. Then he added less irritably: "You might as well, you know. I'll stay here till you do."

Almost immediately he caught sight of an indistinct figure crouched beside the dressing table. It rose slowly to its feet, and he vaguely discerned golf knickers and a flannel shirt. The curtains in the bedroom had also been drawn across the window, but Peter, keeping a wary eye open for a possible attack, jerked them back.

"We might as well have some light on the subject," he said, over his shoulder.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" The stranger had made no move for a weapon, but stood leaning with one hand on the dressing table. The drawers of the table, Peter noted with a quick sidewise glance, were open and their contents had been tossed on the bed.

"Well, that's a cool one! You've anticipated me. It's the very question I'm going to ask, and you're going to answer. Go out into the other room ahead of me. If you make a

break for the door, I'll fill you so full of holes you won't be able to hold your liquor—you'll be a human sieve."

Peter beamed with satisfaction at this histrionic effort. That last sentence, he flattered himself, sounded convincingly dangerous—especially as his pockets contained nothing more menacing than a copy pencil. Evidently his captive was suitably impressed, for he moved jerkily forward.

"Now pull those curtains, and let's have a look at you," Peter further commanded. He observed with a trace of contempt that the hands which obediently pulled back the curtains of the outer room were visibly shaking. Not a very bold desperado, it would appear. The next moment he took an involuntary step backward. For the first time, the light fell full upon the face now turned sullenly towards him. Despite the knickers and flannel shirt, despite the mannish haircut, there was no doubt about it. The intruder whom he had caught lurking in the house of murder was a woman!

"Well—I'm—blessed!" Peter surveyed the thin, harried face and twitching eyelids with astonishment. But Peter was not to be taken aback for long. "However, the original question still stands. Who are you, and what are you doing here?" he said, with a quick adjustment to the new situation confronting him. "What were you rifling those drawers for? What were you after?" he persisted, as the girl stood knotting her trembling hands together in silence. The curt firmness of his tone had its effect.

"I was hunting for—some perfume," she said in a low, agitated voice.

The wild absurdity of the answer led Peter for a moment to wonder whether she had been terrified into blurting out the first lie that came to her mind. It was impossible to associate perfume with this angular figure in masculine shirt and knickers, even supposing that anyone would break into the house for such a purpose. As a hiking suit, her costume was not in itself unusual; in fact, it was familiar

enough in a country where women often hunted, fished, and camped in the mountains. Peter wondered why it had deceived him so completely, even in the half light. The question, trivial as it was, irked him involuntarily. The effect was somehow different from that of the ordinary woman's outing costume. With a quick, unobtrusive glance, he sought that point of difference, and found it. It was something negative—the absence of a single trace of femininity in the cut of the shoes, the heavy golf stockings, the lack of any relieving note of scarf or tie. An attempt at disguise? But no woman adopting unfamiliar masculine clothing would ever put her hands in her pockets with that natural, accustomed gesture.

As if the brief wandering of his mind had freshened his perceptions, the significance of her reply to his question came with a stab of revelation. Those twitching muscles were not the signs of mere nervousness born of fear.

"Oh, yes—the perfume," he said. "It's no use for you to look. It's gone. There isn't any more!"

"Gone! But I must have it!" The girl's voice rose wildly. "She promised me! She promised to give it to me. Oh, find it for me, please!"

"You knew what it was?" Peter asked gently.

The girl nodded miserably, with bent head.

"Yes, I knew," she whispered. "But it wasn't her fault. She gave it to me at first for neuralgia. It was the only thing that helped. Then—I had to keep on buying it. I had to come to her for it."

"And where did she get it?" Peter's eyes ached with pity, but his voice was stern.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know! I wish I did." She had turned to the wall and leaned against it, her shoulders shaking with weak sobs.

"I wish you did, too," Peter muttered grimly. So Luna sold the stuff—had deliberately given this girl the drug

habit for the sake of gain. The utterly selfish cruelty of it turned him cold with horror.

"You mustn't blame her," the girl said, as if she had read his thoughts. "I was in such pain—that's how I first came to know her. I heard she could cure things the doctors couldn't touch. I begged her to help me."

"Hm, maybe so." Perhaps Luna had yielded to the girl's pleading with a misguided pity—though she must have known the danger of such a course. The money could not have meant much to Luna—not enough to court the risk of discovery. But it might have been the means of binding another human creature to her in helpless dependence, another witness to her ruthless power. Or—might it be that the whole witchcraft cult was only a blind for a traffic in drugs?

"Try to pull yourself together," he said with kindly firmness. "Sit down and tell me all about it. You don't look as if you'd been at it very long. I think we can pull you out. I'll help you. I'll take you to a doctor and we'll see what can be done."

"I can't—I can't go on like this," she shuddered.

"You won't have to. I've promised to help you, haven't I?" Peter's calm assurance had its desired effect. The girl wiped her eyes with trembling fingers and sank into the chair which Peter drew forward.

"My name is Piper," Peter said in matter-of-fact tones. "And yours?"

"I'm Frank Hodgson. My real name is Frances, but everyone calls me Frank—I prefer it."

"And did you put these flowers here?"

"Yes," she said in a small, desolate voice. "I loved her. I loved her more than anything else on earth. I would have died for her. I could have killed anyone who took her from me. She wouldn't understand. She couldn't understand—and there were times when I could have killed her rather

than give her up to those others. And now she is dead." The voice dropped with a curiously hopeless finality.

There were times when out of the turbid depths of her perverted jealousy she had been driven to thoughts of murder. Peter's thoughtful gaze dropped to the hands that lay twisted in her lap. The sleeve of her shirt had slipped back along her arm—and her right wrist was bandaged!

CHAPTER XX

"How long ago did you hurt your arm?" Peter asked with casual solicitude.

"Oh, that?" Frances glanced down at her bandaged wrist. "I sprained it two weeks ago. It was a bad wrist sprain, and it's been too weak for me to use it since. It's getting better now, though, and anyway I can use the left one pretty well."

Two weeks ago—at the time of Luna's murder she had been able to use only her left hand. Could a normally right-handed person shoot with the left hand? Not from the shoulder, perhaps, but the rifle had rested on the window sill—and the knife thrust, the autopsy surgeon said, had been an awkward one. No woman would be likely to make a practice of whittling, he had glibly decided. But this woman was patently one of Nature's tragic misfits, a victim of the warping fate that had veered her life away from its normal channels.

Peter was acutely conscious of the inexorable cruelty of life as he moved quietly to the bench and inspected the flowering boughs which covered it. He had seen Barbara cut branches—gnaw them off with the blade of a knife, leaving shaggy ends of fibers. But these were cut cleanly through with a double stroke, making a sharp V at the bottom. The woman who had cut those branches, who wore men's clothes and wanted to be called Frank, who had loved Luna with an intense and possessive passion, was quite capable of a masculine skill at whittling.

Just how far toward madness her jealous obsession might

have carried her he could not guess. Under the influence of drugs she might have been capable of carrying out her despairing threats—and, if she had, the placing of the love letters and the hands crossed in an attitude of devotion on Luna's breast had a clear significance, expressive of the clash of love and hate in her tortured mind. The hint of something psychopathic in the crime, which had haunted him from the first, was understandable enough on that interpretation.

Peter found himself somewhat more sympathetic to the murderer than to the victim. His disapproval of Luna's character was steadily increasing. She seemed to wreck everyone she touched! There was no escape from that wreckage; he realized, with an aching pity, that neither the destructive tyranny of morphine nor the more subtle but no less devastating tyranny of emotional abnormality could save Frances Hodgson in the eyes of the law. There was no doubt whatever that she was legally sane. And if she had committed the murder, he would be the one to track her through all the maze of her torment.

He had let himself in for it, and he could not turn back now. It was like one of those ridiculously involved problems of conduct which people were always sending to the "Let Doris Advise You" columns of the *Herald*. Only this one answered itself. He couldn't let Vincent be convicted of a crime he hadn't committed, just because the person who did it was herself as tragic a victim as the woman she had killed.

Frances had watched him in silence when he examined the acacia branches. She leaned back in her chair, looking worn and spent, but calmer, as if her outburst had eased the strain of her quivering nerves.

"I'm sorry," Peter said softly. "You must have had a pretty rotten time of it."

"Yes, always." The words were spoken with a dull ac-

ceptance of long familiar pain. "The only happiness I've ever had in all my life was when I first knew Luna—before I knew that she didn't really care for me."

"You didn't believe in her—her occult powers, then?"

"They said she could do wonderful things, almost miraculous. I was ready to try anything at all that might help, no matter how unreasonable it sounded. I hadn't got much comfort out of reasonable people." The thin lips twisted in a bitter smile. "And then, after I met her, I'd have believed that the moon was made of green cheese if she said so. She seemed almost superhuman. But she wasn't. I found that out. She didn't want my love. But she let herself be dragged down—— Oh, it was cruel of her to tell me! But she seemed to glory in it—or perhaps she wanted to see me suffer. She said I was a silly fool to mind. A lot of good that did!"

"You mean—Earl Vincent?"

"She told me about Vincent, but he wasn't the only one."

Peter nodded comprehendingly. Evidently Luna took no cognizance of the code which decreed that only a cad would kiss and tell. The chief purpose of her conquests seemed to be the delight she took in flaunting them.

"Oh, I know I must sound wild and crazy to talk like this, but you don't know what this last week has been!" The girl's breath caught in a strangling sob. "There was the awfulness of it—of knowing that Luna was really dead. And the loneliness. She was the only one here that I had anything to do with. The others kept away from me and I from them. They looked on me as queer—though goodness knows they're queer enough themselves, when it comes to that!" she added with a flash of spirit. "There was no one to turn to—no one to speak to, even—no one to tell. And of course, after the first day, it was terrible, not to be able to find my—my medicine."

"When did you have your last dose?"

"The day before—the last day——"

"I know." Peter spared her the anguish of completing the broken sentence. "You were still in pretty good shape, then, when the police came around the next day. That's why they didn't suspect anything out of the way when they questioned you."

Frances nodded.

"I didn't tell them then. Everything was so confused and horrible I didn't think of it. But I thought they'd come back. And I'd made up my mind to tell them——"

Tell them what? That she had committed the murder? That she had seen it done? Peter dared not ask.

"I don't think they're coming back—at least, not soon," he ventured at last in a voice from which he repressed all signs of excitement. "I think you'd better tell me instead. I'll do my best to advise you."

"I was out in the woods when Jackson found the—the body, and telephoned for the police," she said. "I wasn't here when the men came to the house in response to the call. I suppose I was probably the last one to know what had happened. I had got up early to pick some flowers to take to—to her. I had stopped to rest, sitting by the edge of the creek, when I heard footsteps behind me and turned my head to look. When I saw who it was, I just sat quietly where I was, so that he wouldn't see me. I didn't want to have to speak to him—I hated him!" The last words were spoken with concentrated venom.

"Who was it you hated?" Peter leaned forward tensely.

"Oscar Miller. He had a bundle under his arm, and he stuffed it into the trunk of a hollow tree. I supposed he was following out one of the charms that Luna was always working on. That's why it didn't make any impression on me at the time. I just waited until he went away, and then I came back here—and the first thing I heard, of course, was that Luna had been found murdered."

"And this is what you didn't tell the police? But why do you think it might be important?" Peter almost stammered in his eagerness.

"I went back later," Frances answered. From the moment of beginning her story she had regained her self-control and spoke with resolute calmness. "I looked in the tree. I saw what he had hurried out to hide in the early morning, before the police had questioned us and searched our cottages. He had rolled up his bathrobe and stuffed it into the tree trunk."

"What color was it?" Peter's voice was oddly hoarse.

"It's a mixed pattern, red and green." The words were coolly spoken, but a smile almost of triumph flitted across her set face.

"And why do you think that wasn't part of some spell —that it had something to do with Luna's death?" Peter hated himself for the trap he was laying. At the request of the police, no description of the red and green cord with which Luna's body was bound had been published. By her own account, Frances Hodgson had known nothing of the murder until she returned from the woods after the arrival of the police. The police, he was sure, had not advertised their search for the bathrobe to which the cord belonged. How then had she known the color of the cord and its significance?

"For the same reason that I hate Oscar Miller! Because he wasn't just one of Luna's followers—he was her lover. She laughed at me because it nearly killed me to know that she accepted his love. I've no doubt he laughed at me too. I have seen the cord to that bathrobe hanging in Luna's room—where he'd left it. It is the same pattern, the same combination of colors. I recognized it at once."

"And what did you infer from that?" Peter insisted.

"If he hadn't been there—if he hadn't been afraid the police would find him out—he wouldn't have slipped out to

hide it before they came. I'd have gone down to tell them, but it was only this morning, when I went to the creek again to cut these blossoms, to lay them where she was lying before they took her away, it suddenly came back to me. I remembered how quiet he had been, and how quick. I found the tree, and I looked—and I saw what was there."

"You mean—you think it was he who killed her?"

"Oh, I don't know! How can I tell what to think?"

"Well, we'll see what he has to say about it anyhow. You tell me exactly where the tree is, and I'll go and look. If he's taken it away again, I'm sunk. But we'll hope he hasn't suspected that you found it, and has left it alone. You'll stay around, won't you—not run away or anything like that?"

"Why should I run away? What good would it do? I can't run away—from myself." The hopeless resignation of her words smote Peter's sympathy, but his questing mind raced on, undeterred by his compassion.

On the one hand, she was a human being, wounded in spirit with wounds that struck deeper than any of the flesh. Before Peter left her he promised to send a doctor who would be able to soothe her crying nerves with bromides. For her own physical sake, it was best for her to stay where she was, for she obviously had no idea of other possible sources of supply of the drug she craved. Peter could no more have left her uncared for than he could have driven past a dog that had been run over in the street.

But on the other hand, she was a factor in the puzzle which he had set himself to solve. He would do everything in his power to see her cured of the habit which Luna had fastened upon her—but he would also do everything in his power to find out the truth of her connection with Luna's death, if there was any connection.

If there was any connection! As Peter made his way quietly through the woods to the tree whose location she had

described, his thoughts whirled and eddied about that question. After all, there was no direct evidence against her—only insubstantial hints and conjectures. But if those conjectures, intangible as they were, were indications of fact, he'd find a way to strip them of their vagueness before he was done. Given her abnormal emotional make-up, further disordered by morphine, she might have been wrought to the pitch of "killing the thing she loved" in a spasm of jealousy. She fitted the picture. Temperamentally, she fitted it far better than Vincent. She could use a knife like a man; and she was temporarily left-handed at the time of the murder. But these items, which had loomed so strikingly at the moment when he discovered them, dwindled on closer inspection. They were very far from being direct or even circumstantial evidence of the crime. Still, they were hints—they fitted in; and if they did not fit by accident, they would form the nucleus for other bits to be fitted together.

The bathrobe was an indication in another direction. But might the bathrobe be a deliberate "plant," to throw suspicion away from herself in the direction of the man who had roused her jealous hate? Could she have stolen it and hidden it for the police—or, as it had turned out, Peter—to find? It was possible, but it implied a keen and cunning and relentless intelligence. Peter stood stock still under a live-oak tree and stared into its branches as if they contained something of compelling interest.

If she was as clever as that, why had she admitted her hatred of Miller and the jealousy which had made her at times hate Luna who so mercilessly played upon it? Surely she would not have presented Peter voluntarily with the motive that made her murder of Luna intelligible. To be sure, she had been nervously unstrung, almost incoherent. That might account for it. And the sprained wrist. She had frankly admitted that it was hurt before Luna's death. Still, a lie on that point would have been dangerous. If her

arm had been bandaged for two weeks, the time could doubtless be checked by other members of the colony.

But would anyone be so unstrung as to tell the damaging truth of her relations with Luna and at the same time so acute as to avoid a damaging lie about her bandaged wrist and to invent a plot for turning suspicion on another? Would drugs account for both her cunning and her candor? Or was he unjustly suspicious? Perhaps all that she had said was the simple truth, with no ulterior implications.

Peter was still absorbed in his effort to disentangle the impressions left by Frances Hodgson when he reached the tree she had described and, thrusting his arm into its capacious hollow, drew out the red and green bathrobe—so absorbed, in fact, that he jumped with a guilty start when a voice at his elbow accosted him with a repetition of the words he had already heard once before that morning.

"Who are you?" the voice demanded, "and what do you think you are doing?"

CHAPTER XXI

PETER whirled about, the bathrobe dangling from lax fingers.

Despite the justifiable purpose of his visit, he felt ludicrously like a small boy caught robbing a bird's nest. His embarrassment was intensified by the knowledge that he doubtless looked as absurd and as guilty as he felt. What reasonable explanation could possibly be given by a young man trespassing on property where he had no ostensible business and discovered pulling a bathrobe out of a tree trunk? He looked at his unexpected visitors with speculative attention, wondering how much, if any, of the truth it would be wise to give them.

Two men stood facing him a few feet away, one of them in advance of the other. The first, judging from his inquiring stare, was the one who had spoken. Everything about him, hair, eyes, skin, and shabby suit, was of a uniform indeterminate color which gave him a curious effect of psychic invisibility—a man whose presence left no imprint on his surroundings: the type of man, Peter reflected, whom you would forget having seen five minutes after he was out of your sight. His thin, stooping figure and the muddy pallor of his skin showed the effects of malnutrition. After a swift, alert glance at his face, Peter instantly decided that he probably had the faddist's solemn concentration on eccentricities of diet, and mistook insufficient nourishment for spirituality.

The face was the face of a mystic who sought solace for his failure to cope with reality in the cloudy, grandiose

verbosities of a dream universe. In continual retreat from life, which he lacked the critical intelligence to face or understand, he would seek with pathetic willingness for refuge in the stars, in the occult properties of numbers, in vague luminous phrases, from the recognition of his inevitable defeat. Turning his back on the harsh crassness of a world he was too weak to challenge, he would wrap himself about with the splendors of fantasy. Those pale luminous eyes would accept without question any route that promised to lead him past the flaming barriers of the world into a region where one could press the button of the ordained and unintelligible formula and forget outer defeat in mythical inner triumph.

"The perfect disciple of all the bogus philosophies—he probably thinks murder is on too low a material plane to bother about," Peter mentally summed up the result of his observations with a hunch of his shoulders.

The second man had already turned away and was idly stripping the leaves from a branch within his reach. He was younger than his companion, not yet twenty, Peter judged, though his face had the settled look of the mentally retarded whose inner growth is ended. His small, closely set eyes were black and opaque and his upper jaw narrowed to a point above a receding chin. Peter had seen the type before, though he was surprised to find an example of it among the followers of a cult. It was more familiar in the juvenile court, a hanger-on of ruffianly gangs, a scapegoat for all their misdeeds, too clumsy to elude discovery, thrust into reformatories, thrust out again, kicked in and out of prisons——

However, Peter thought, pulling himself back to actuality, this one seemed to have escaped the toe of society's boot for the present. He had moved forward with a shambling quickness and caught at the bathrobe in Peter's hand.

"What you got Miller's bathrobe for?" he asked. "Miller'll be mad as hell if you've snitched anything off of him."

"It *is* Miller's, then. Well, that's settled, anyhow. I accidentally found it out here, and I was just wondering to whom I should return it." Peter sat down on a fallen tree trunk and continued conversationally: "Do you both belong to the colony?"

"I did," the man who had first accosted Peter answered. "Mrs. Russell brought her son here for help. He has been bewitched—he was under some malicious influence. Luna was working on it, to find the counteracting spell." He spoke in tones as colorless as if he were discussing a physician's diagnosis. "Are you one of us?"

"I talked with Luna only once—but I was very deeply impressed," Peter answered. "I meant to come again for further study. But of course it's too late for that now. I came out to look around. I hoped I might meet somebody like you, who had gone deeply into occult phenomena. Perhaps you will help me to meet the other members. I couldn't help wondering whether there wasn't a deeper mystery in Luna's death—something the police don't understand."

"The police don't know where to look for understanding. They are content with outward and visible signs. They are under a spell that blinds their eyes, just as surely as Charlie Russell here had a spell put on him—an evil spell. People knew about these things, long ago. Now they have forgotten. They are content with the knowledge of this world. They laugh at such things. But those who laugh are punished for their ignorance in ways they know not! And still they do not understand, because the old wisdom is buried and lost." The pale eyes shone with fanatical conviction. "Luna had the power of witchcraft—but the police don't believe that. They think all the witches were burnt long ago. They don't even know that it was a witch who died—how then can they find out anything about her death?"

"Well, they haven't found out much so far, for a fact," Peter agreed soothingly. "I'm willing to be convinced, you know. But first I'd better take Mr. Miller his bathrobe, if you'll show me where he lives."

"He'll be awfully mad." Charlie Russell shambled forward and laid a timid hand on his companion's sleeve. "I didn't take it, Carey! You'll tell him I didn't take it, won't you?"

"He won't blame you, Charlie," the man addressed as Carey assured him with half-contemptuous pity. "You stay with me, and you'll be all right."

Peter dropped to the rear of the little procession which made its way, single file, back to the clearing. The curious companionship of the mystic and the half-wit had been revealed in Carey's last words. With Charlie, Carey could feel superior and protective. To Charlie alone he was a stalwart hero, not a negligible failure. But it was on Charlie, not on Carey, that Peter riveted his gaze. That timid clutching at Carey's sleeve—he had grasped it with his left hand. His odd shuffling gait, as Peter watched it now, was revealed as a slight limp, doubtless due to a partially recovered paralysis of the right side. His left hand swung free as he walked, but the right remained hidden in his pocket.

"Every blame person I meet has something the matter with his right hand," Peter sputtered to himself. "If this keeps up, the left-handed shot and knife thrust won't mean anything at all. We'll have to count it out altogether, if it applies in one way or another to half the people in sight."

Charlie drew back as they approached the first of a row of cabins set in a wide semi-circle at some distance from Luna's own quarters. Peter's curiosity was rewarded by seeing the boy's right hand fall from his pocket as he stepped back. It was withered and partially helpless. Peter shook off a sense of obsession. It was with irrational relief that he saw Carey lift an entirely serviceable right hand and knock on the door, and it was with a returning sense of nightmare

that his eyes flew first of all to the right hand of the man who opened in response to the summons, and saw that three fingers had been amputated at the joint.

"Another one!" he groaned inwardly.

"Hello, Carey, what do you want?" Miller began gruffly. Then he caught sight of Peter with the bathrobe flung across his arm, and almost hurled himself through the doorway. Charlie clung to Carey's arm in manifest alarm. "What are you doing with that? What sort of monkey business is this, anyway?" His clenched fists were drawn back and he faced Peter truculently.

"Keep cool," Peter advised with irritating calm. "I don't know just what the 'monkey business' is—yet. Did you lose this—er—article of apparel?"

"It's no business of yours," Miller said sullenly, facing Peter with a belligerent stare.

"You're on the wrong tack altogether." Peter returned the angry stare with an equally steady gaze of appraisal. Miller was assuredly out of place in any cult colony. There was nothing of the mystic, of yearning for a world beyond the obvious, in his short, thick-set frame, his broad, choleric face, flushed now with anger and with the heavy black brows drawn almost together across his square forehead.

"I'm not—one of these," he gestured almost imperceptibly toward Carey and Charlie, who had stepped aside at Miller's onslaught. "I'm 'a white horse of a different color' altogether. If you've any explanation to make, I'm willing to hear it. If you haven't, you'll very likely wish you had. I'll call your attention to the fact, which you very well know, that the police were looking for this bathrobe. You knew they were looking for it, and you hid it. I might also remind you that Luna was killed by a left-handed person."

Peter allowed his glance to waver for an instant in the direction of Charlie, in time to see the youth slip his withered right hand back into his pocket with hasty furtiveness

at Peter's words. "Now you may talk or not, just exactly as you like," he concluded briskly.

"I still don't see what it has to do with you," Miller blustered.

"Don't you?" Peter grinned. "Well, I'm giving you ever such a good chance to find out. If I go away now, you'll just be consumed with curiosity—and then you'll learn by landing with a splash in the middle of some very hot water."

For a moment Miller stood his ground. Then he turned on the two men who stood uncertainly in the path behind Peter.

"What is this anyway—a tea party? Go along and stick pins in wax dolls."

"If I did," Carey said with curious mildness, "you might not like it. If I had been the one to find your bathrobe, and had buried it, you might have pined away to your death as the cloth rotted. Those things have happened before now. But I won't. Charlie and I have nothing against you, have we, Charlie?"

The youth turned his slow, malevolent black eyes on the man in the doorway.

"You wait," he muttered. "Somebody'll get mad and make a spell against you some day, and then where will you be?"

Miller bared his strong white teeth and leaned his head back with a roar of contemptuous laughter.

"All right, go as far as you like. As for you," he turned to Peter, his face sobering into a withdrawn watchfulness, "if you've anything to say to me, come inside and say it."

CHAPTER XXII

PETER followed Miller into the cabin and sat down, folding the bathrobe across his knees.

"I'll thank you to give me my property," Miller demanded.

But Peter ignored his outstretched hand.

"If I let go of it, you might find a better place to hide it next time," he suggested. "But just in case you had any idea of taking it by force, I'll remind you that I have two witnesses who can describe it and testify that you claimed it as yours. So getting violent won't help—not one little bit, it won't. By the way, I take it you haven't very much confidence in these ideas about spells and witchcrafts?"

"What if I do? What if I believe in it, and hid that bathrobe as part of a charm, and you've just gone and spoiled the—the effect, by dragging it out? What if I told you that?"

"Well," Peter said with disarming candor, "I should be forced to say that I didn't believe a word of it. I'd hate to be as impolite as all that, so suppose you don't say it. Even if I hadn't seen the way you acted with those two outside, anyone could tell that you're simply not the type."

"I'm glad I don't look that weak in the head, anyhow." For the first time Miller's heavy face softened in a smile. Thus relaxed from the tension of anger and distrust, his features had a certain rough-hewn handsomeness not devoid of charm.

"Then, if you didn't believe in Luna's witchcraft, what did you come here for?"

"Isn't that pretty much my own business?"

"Not at all." Peter hunched his shoulders almost to his ears in a monumental shrug. The only way to crash his way past Miller's defenses, he decided, was by colossal bluff. "It's my business because I'm investigating this murder, and if you don't tell me every blessed thing you know about it, and tell it quick, you'll find yourself clapped into jail charged with the crime. You're skating on mighty thin ice, my friend. There are several persons in this neighborhood who know more than you think they do."

"If Jackson told you I gave him that liquor so I could kill Luna, it's a damn lie!" Miller exploded. "He doesn't know a thing about what happened. He couldn't know. He was dead to the world."

With a supreme effort, Peter held every muscle of his face rigid. Only the blazing brightness of his eyes betrayed his surprise at this wholly unexpected revelation.

"Oh, yes?" he said with arising inflection. "Well, your part of it doesn't look too good to me. But I'm giving you a chance to tell it." The languid drawl, to anyone who knew Peter, was a sure betrayal of his intense inward excitement.

"That's what I get for ever being mixed up with a weird bunch like this!" Miller said aggrievedly. "Of course I was crazy about Luna. She thought she could work me the way she did everybody else, but I wasn't going to stand for it. She couldn't pick me up and then throw me away whenever she got ready. I won't say that she wasn't a woman who could drive any man to murder, but that isn't saying I killed her. I didn't."

"We'll leave that as an open question for the moment," Peter suggested. "I'd hardly expect you to say you did. But you didn't go to all the pains of getting Jackson drunk out of sheer sympathy for thirst. What was it then?"

"I could almost believe in Luna's precious devil, the way things turned out," Miller exclaimed. "But how was I to know I was headed straight for a jam? If I tell you, you'll

see that I had reason enough to kill her, supposing I'd go off my nut that far, and if I don't tell you, you'll think I did it anyhow—and likely find a way to make me swing for it."

"Very likely." Peter accepted this extremely trying dilemma with unperturbed good nature. "However, if you have a story, you might as well practise it on me."

"She wasn't playing straight with me. I suspected it, but I wanted to make absolutely sure, and then have it out with her. She was smart, but she couldn't make a fool of me, not if I knew it!" Miller's face flushed darkly with remembered humiliation, Peter could well imagine Luna's delight in goading this simple, primitive lover—goading him perhaps to the pitch of murder.

"And what, exactly, did you do about it?" Peter broke the heavy silence, in which memories gathered like darkening thunder clouds.

"Well, if you want the straight of it, here it is. You can take it or leave it."

"Thanks," Peter murmured, "I'll do just that."

"I did have a reason for giving Jackson a quart of jack and telling him go to it. He's getting old and has some pretty bad twinges of rheumatism. I told him it would help drive the devil out of his joints. That night—the night it happened—Luna told me to stay away. She said she had a business appointment, but I didn't like the way she looked when she said it. I thought there was something up, and I made up my mind to find out."

"Spying, eh?" Peter's voice had a cutting edge.

"Call it that if you like," Miller agreed sullenly. "I wasn't going to let her double-cross me and get away with it. She thought she could wind me round her little finger. She could, too, when it came to talking. That's why I wanted to get something she couldn't talk her way out of. Then I'd put it up to her straight—she could either play square or we'd quit. No woman can make a plaything out of me."

"Her tastes were somewhat catholic," Peter commented with an impish grin. He could well imagine the satisfaction Luna would take in the conquest of this conquering male, binding him to her by her cleverness and her fascination and delighting in his struggles to assert supremacy. Undoubtedly, too, the man's emotional simplicity and earthy vigor would have their attraction to her more subtle temperament.

"I never heard her say she was a Catholic," Miller answered with a puzzled scowl. "What made you think she was?"

"Never mind—go on with what happened. Did you find the other man?"

"Yes."

"You did? And did you explode your fireworks?"

With a rapid glance of retrospection, Peter mentally reconstructed the room as he had seen it on the morning after the murder. There had been no signs of a struggle, and if Miller had encountered his rival, he would almost inevitably have met the situation in the way he knew best, the way of physical combat.

"I waited till pretty late, and then I went around and peeked through the window. He was there, all right, but it wasn't what I expected to see. They were having a regular knock-down argument about something. I couldn't hear what he said, but he acted as if he was making some threat, and she was protesting against it."

"Do you know who it was?" Peter interrupted.

"I'd never seen him before—a tallish, middle-aged man, with black hair turning to gray. But I heard Luna call him by name—you know how her voice carried, like a bell."

Peter nodded. Well he remembered that vibrant, resonant voice.

"She clutched hold of his arm and said: 'You can't mean it, Earl! For God's sake, don't!' "

"Do you mean to say you were an eye witness of the murder? You watched him threaten to kill her and didn't do anything about it?"

"How was I to know he was threatening to kill her?" Miller growled defensively. "It looked as if she had been telling me the truth, and it was some kind of business row. Anyhow, it didn't look like a love feast. I'd leave it to Luna to get the best of anybody in an argument. It didn't look like any of my business, so I went away again. I didn't have any excuse to barge in, that I could see."

Peter's face remained without expression, but behind that impassiveness he was sifting Miller's story and finding some lumps in it. He was inclined to put down the mysterious stranger as pure and rather crude invention. The description did not tally in any respect with Earl Vincent. Undoubtedly Miller had heard Earl's name, and was using it for his own protection.

"Just why, then, did you slip out in the early morning and hide your bathrobe, if that's all you know about what happened that night?" he pounced.

"I never said it was all I knew!" Miller strove to maintain his attitude of defiance, but his control was visibly near the breaking point. Peter suddenly recalled what a police detective had once told him. "When I'm quizzing a suspect," he had said, "I watch for the sweat to break out at the corners of his nose. Then I know he's worried, and worried bad." Peter leaned forward, focusing his near-sighted eyes on Miller's face. There they were, the tiny beads of perspiration at the base of his thick nose, no larger than the minute bubbles at the rim of a glass.

Miller's hands were clenched, but this time the gesture was not one of offense. He was obviously clinging to the last remnants of his old assurance.

"I went back," he muttered. "I couldn't sleep. I thought maybe the man had stayed, after all. That was hours later

—it was just beginning to get light. I looked in at the bedroom window and couldn't see anything, so I went around to the front. The door was an inch or two ajar. I kicked it open and stepped in."

Peter watched his throat work painfully as he swallowed with difficulty before going on.

"I saw—her, and she was dead. And there was the cord of my bathrobe wrapped around her! I didn't dare touch anything. I was scared to death I'd leave fingerprints all over the place. I just ran out as if all hell was after me and got rid of that bathrobe before the police would find it. The cord had been hanging on a hook on the bedroom for weeks, but who would believe that?"

"Well, that's just the one thing I do believe—Frances Hodgson noticed it there," Peter interjected. "As for the rest, it would take a lot of proving before it sounded really convincing."

"Get to work and prove it, then!" Miller flamed. "Find out a few things about what really went on here. I don't say the man I saw quarreling with Luna did it. Maybe he's as much out of it as I am. There are plenty of other people around. There's that nit-wit, Charlie Russell, for one, prowling about at all hours of the night. Ask Mrs. Russell why she's been scared to death and crying whenever you look at her and saying that, whatever he did, her boy isn't responsible because he was bewitched in his cradle! Ask Mrs. Tanner where her husband is, and why she's worried sick!"

"Thanks," Peter said, "I will. But meanwhile, don't you take it into your head to go into other spots, as the leopard said. You're still sufficiently interesting that I yearn to have you around."

"Do you mean I'm under arrest?" Miller's dark face paled.

"Lord, no! I'm not a policeman. Did you think I was?"

"Who the hell are you, then? And what business have

you got poking your nose into what doesn't concern you? I'll go where I please, and I'd like to see you stop me!"

"You'd better stay," Peter said very gently. "You see, I happen to be the guy who found Earl Vincent. If you try any vanishing act, you'd have just about as good a chance to keep out of sight as an elephant in a breakfast nook. Your story will come out in the *Herald,* not because I believe it, but because it will interest our dear readers. As to how much of it, if any, is true, I'll take that under advisement, and let you know."

"You mean," Miller gasped, "you've strung me along like this, and you're nothing but a damn newspaper reporter?"

"Nothing but," Peter confessed modestly. "I'm sorry you didn't grasp it before. I'd have told you if you'd asked, you know."

"I'll ask next time," Miller promised vindictively. "The next reporter that comes around me will get a clout in the jaw that will knock him cold!"

Peter's hand was on the door knob before he answered. He had no desire to receive that promised blow on his own chin.

"That," he grinned as he edged his way through the door, "will be no end kind of you. It'll reduce competition!"

CHAPTER XXIII

PETER had spoken truly when he promised to take Miller's story under advisement. It would make a good yarn, keep the Luna murder alive as a real mystery, give the public something to argue about. But beneath that story lay—what?

"Excellent fiction, but how much fact?" Peter posed the question to himself as he set out to follow Miller's advice and seek Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Tanner.

It would not hurt Miller to have a scare thrown into him. For one thing, he would hardly dare now to leave what Peter disrespectfully called the "reservation." If Miller thought that Peter was convinced of his guilt, so much the better. If he were still concealing anything, he would be the more likely to crack under the strain of anxiety if he believed that suspicion were turned strongly against him. Something, certainly, was being held back, either by Miller or someone else. The picture refused to come clear. Somehow, somewhere, it didn't click into place with each factor accounted for.

Suppose that Miller had killed her—would he have been likely to set the scene with such dramatic elaboration? It was easy enough to imagine him performing a deed of simple violence. It was easy, even, to imagine that he had bound Luna with the bathrobe cord in his rage, forgetting that the cord could be traced to him. But would he have bound her at all? Somehow it was much easier to visualize him as knocking her down where she stood. And would he have placed the love letters on her bosom? Miller would hardly impress anyone as a sentimentalist.

But he might, on the other hand, have more cunning than Peter gave him credit for. He might have added just those touches of the bizarre to turn attention away from such a person as himself to one of the group which he had characterized as a "weird bunch." That would have been abysmally clever—depth below depth of subtlety. But it was a dangerous error to assume too readily that the man who killed Luna was stupid. Who could tell, in that moment of crisis when Luna lay dead before him, what devices beyond the ordinary limitations of his intelligence might have leaped to his aid from the hidden resources of the subconscious?

Yet it was quite possible that he had not killed her. According to his own story, he had been absent for hours between his first peep through the window and his early-morning visit. The first occasion, in fact, might have been wholly fictitious. In all probability it was a lie from start to finish. If the rest of his account were true, if he had found Luna dead and been terrified by the thought that he might be suspected of her murder, he might have invented the quarrel, the threats, the pleading in a frantic effort to introduce an unknown intruder as the real culprit.

Of all silly mistakes, one of the silliest was to suppose that because a man lied in one particular he might not be telling the truth in another. If he hadn't made it too good—if he hadn't brought in that cry of "Earl"—Peter might even have considered the possibility that Miller had told the truth throughout. But the one part of his story which it was possible to check was manifestly false—there was no getting around that! It was a foolish lie to tell; but then, Miller did not know that Peter had seen Vincent, and, when called upon for a description, had doubtless given the first one that entered his mind.

There was still plenty of uncertainty about it, both ways. The thing had so many ramifications—there was no way to be sure, except by considering every possibility, leaving

nothing unchecked, uneliminated. It was still just as possible as ever that some member of the cult was guilty. There was Frances Hodgson—and there was the swift, furtive concealment of Charlie Russell's right hand when Peter mentioned that the murder had been committed by a left-handed person. Even Tanner was not out of it—not by a long sight!

Peter made his way slowly along the wide semi-circle of bungalows, his head bent, his eyes fixed unseeing on the ground before him. The sound of low voices roused him. Two women had drawn their chairs out under a live-oak tree. Even at a distance there was something forlorn in the way the two chairs were huddled close together, as if for comfort. As Peter wandered across the grass in their direction, he noticed that one had a pair of overalls in her lap for mending and the other carried a roll of knitting, but both pairs of hands moved listlessly, as if their owners' thoughts were on other things.

Peter dropped down on the grass beside them, balancing his hat on his hunched knees.

"I think you must be Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Tanner," he said. "I was looking for you. I'd like to talk with you for a few minutes, if I may?"

The overalls slipped from the lap of the woman nearest him and lay on the ground, unnoticed. Her thin brown hand flew to her throat.

"Are they after him—after Charlie?" Her voice rose in a wail of despair.

The other woman methodically folded her knitting, thrust the needles into it at an angle, and dropped the ball into her lap. She surveyed Peter with faded blue eyes in which courage fought with anxiety.

"I guess maybe you've found out something about Lewis," she said with dull finality.

"It's about both of them." Peter shifted his position so

that he faced both women. "I know you're worried. But suspense is the very hardest thing of all, isn't it?"

There was no trace of the Peter who had bullied and bluffed Miller in the young man who sat with one arm propped behind him on the grass, his ugly, mobile face turned to the women above him, his steady gray eyes gentle with comprehension of their suffering. There was no act of cruelty, Peter thought sadly, which did not cast its dark shadow beyond the victim to the innocent and loving.

"If anything's happened to Lewis, it's my fault," Mrs. Tanner said abruptly. "I'll tell them it's all my fault! He got so mad he didn't know what he was doing. But it was me that drove him to it, though goodness knows, I didn't mean to. I never dreamed——" Her voice broke in a dry sob. "I meant it for the best," she whispered weakly.

"I'm sure you did," Peter said kindly. "I'd like to help you if I can. But first I must know one thing. Do you really want to find your husband? Would you rather face the truth, whatever it is?"

"If I could only tell them that it's my fault—surely they wouldn't blame him! He's always been so quick tempered, he wouldn't know what he was doing. I can't bear to think of him, without anybody to look after him. If I only knew where to reach him, I'd tell him to come back. They'd have to believe me—that it was my fault—wouldn't they? They wouldn't really blame him?" Mrs. Tanner plucked at the gray wool in her lap with agitated fingers.

"I'll tell you exactly what I know, and if you want to tell me the rest, you can," Peter said. "I can't possibly judge till I know what's happened. But I honestly think that your husband, if he's in hiding, is having a harder time than if he faced what he's done, hard as that might be. I know about the money you gave to Luna, and how determined he was to get it back."

"Of course I oughtn't to have done it, I suppose. Only, things had always been so drab, so slow. Lewis always wanted to save, and of course that was the sensible thing to do. I never dared tell him how—how glorious I thought it would be, just once, to do something magnificent and foolish. Not foolish, exactly, but—adventurous. Every penny we ever had was scraped together, bit by bit. We went to the Methodist Church at home. He never guessed that I wanted to be marvelously, grandly, fabulously wicked. I suppose you think that sounds too silly for words?"

"No," Peter said slowly, "I don't. You had your belated chance at glamor, and you took it. I don't blame you. I'd probably have done the same thing myself, if I'd had it squashed down in me all that time."

"That's it! I knew Lewis wouldn't think it was sensible—but we'd been sensible for so long, and there hadn't been much—much fun in it. I read stories about fortunes made overnight. Just think, if Luna really had that magic power. Other people had thought they had it, way back in the old times. If she could do that—instead of a little ranch in California, we'd go to the Riviera. I'd have diamond earrings. More than anything in all my life I've wanted diamond earrings," Mrs. Tanner confessed with a deprecating smile.

"Once," she went on shyly, "I really hoped I could get them. A great-aunt died and left me five hundred dollars. But of course Lewis wouldn't let me spend it. I never even told him that I'd meant to. When the check came, he put it into his pocket and began figuring it up on the savings account at the bank. He never dreamed how foolish I'd meant to be."

"And Luna was going to give you your chance for all the foolish things you'd dreamed of doing—was that it?"

Mrs. Tanner's eyes shone with a reminiscent light through her tears.

"Yes, and I'll bet she'd have done it, too, if—if this terrible thing hadn't happened. She was wonderful! It was all true about alchemy, she said, only it was a lost art till she discovered it again. If I'd give her the twenty thousand to start with, she could make it over into ten times that much. Only I must have faith. If I'd just have faith, she'd do all the rest. And I did! You couldn't help having faith in her, when she talked to you. But then—then——" Her voice faltered and the light died from her eyes. "Lewis came, and of course he didn't understand. He said she'd stolen the money and if he'd known I was such a fool he'd never have trusted me with it for a minute. He wouldn't—wouldn't wait."

"I know," Peter said. "He went to the district attorney about it."

"If he'd only waited, everything would have been all right—I know it would! But when the lawyer wouldn't do anything about it, he was furious. He said: 'This isn't the end. I'll get that money back if I have to choke it out of her.' He wouldn't tell me what he was going to do. I thought—— We still have a little property left back East, and I thought he was going back there to sell it, maybe, and get money to hire a lawyer. But—but—I've written and—he never went back. I don't know what to think. I'm—I'm—scared."

"Don't you worry so." Mrs. Russell bent forward to pat the quivering knee of the other woman. "Maybe he did start back, and got delayed somehow. Maybe this gentleman can find out for you."

"They're looking for him already. Every effort is being made to find him," Peter said consolingly. But the implication of his words was not lost on the woman who sat twisting strands of gray wool until the skein tore in her fingers.

"You mean the police are looking for him?"

Peter nodded dumbly. It was cruel to tell her the truth. It would be even more cruel to lie.

"I'd rather they found him. Even if he did it, I'd rather they found him," she said, as if repeating words that had said themselves over and over in her mind. "I keep thinking. He's—he's fussy about little things. His eggs have to be boiled just two minutes, not a second over. And he can't stand to have a loose button on his clothes. He's not used to living rough. Doesn't he know, if he only came back, I'd explain how it was? I'd tell how it was all my fault, and they couldn't blame him. They'd take me instead. If I could only tell him that! Then he'd come back, and it would be me they'd punish. You see I don't know how to look for him or how to get word to him—that's what makes me feel so helpless."

"You'd like to send him a message—that you want him to come back?" Peter asked.

"You mean—you could help me do that? Oh, if you only could!" Mrs. Tanner's eyes held Peter's imploringly.

"You know what it would mean, don't you?" Peter explained. "He'd have to tell the truth, you know." He sought for words that would soften what he had to say. "He might have to stand trial. I'm afraid you couldn't do that for him."

"But they'd know that whatever he did was just because he was so mad he couldn't see straight. Why, he—he even hit me once. But he was awfully sorry afterwards. Surely it would be better for him to come back than to be wandering around, goodness knows where, without anybody to look after him."

Peter stared at the blade of grass in his hand. It was starkly impossible to tell this gray-haired woman with the wistful, troubled eyes that "being sorry" would not stand as a defense for murder. But Lewis Tanner as a fugitive from justice, bereft of his two-minute eggs and proper attention to his buttons, was at once a ludicrous and an exasperating figure. He would be sure to be picked up sooner

or later. He would not have the faintest notion of how to elude the far-flung cordons that had been thrown out to apprehend him.

"I'll tell you what I can do," he said at last. "I happen to work on a newspaper. I can print your message to him, and maybe he'll see it. Perhaps that is just what is needed to bring him back. He must be fairly uncomfortable by this time, wherever he is."

"I call it mean for him to leave her like that, worried to death and facing it all alone!" Mrs. Russell exclaimed.

"Oh, but Lewis is always so practical—he wouldn't think of it like that," Mrs. Tanner insisted loyally. "Whatever he did, he'd be sure it was for the best."

"Still, the fact remains that he nipped off and left you facing the music. If he's thought it over, maybe he's sorry for that, too, by this time. By the way, I suppose you haven't any idea whether he actually did see Luna and demand the money back? Do you suppose he could possibly have got it from her?"

If Tanner had killed Luna and robbed her, it would complicate the situation. With plenty of funds, he might have left the country, and finding him would not be such an easy matter, after all. Nobody knew what money or valuables Luna might have kept in the house. Tanner, of course, would not consider it robbery but restoration. If Luna had refused him when he encountered her with his anger already at the boiling point . . .

He was used to meek subjection as the only conceivable attitude for a woman. He had crushed every romantic yearning in his wife until, given her one chance, she had been an easy prey, ready enough to believe in Luna's rainbow promises. He had already been sure that his way was "best." Meeting with the first overt opposition in his life, he might have killed Luna in a fury the more violent because he would feel himself upheld by righteous indignation. He had

overpowered her first and bound her, perhaps, and then struck her with the knife when she refused to give up the money. Panic-stricken by the unexpected and terrifying fact of murder, he might have fled.

"Your husband had a hunting rifle, didn't he?" Peter asked suddenly.

Mrs. Tanner moaned and dropped her face in her hands.

"Yes," she whispered. "He did. He had an old one back home, but I don't know whether he brought it with him out here. Only he never was much of a hand to throw things away. If he'd only been willing to listen to me! But I only made things worse. He said—he said he never wanted to see me again till he'd settled with 'that woman'—that's what he called Luna. I tried to tell him what she'd said to me, so maybe he'd wait. But he wouldn't listen. And he wouldn't tell me what he was going to do. He said I didn't deserve to know."

"Well, my dear, you *don't* know. Nobody knows that he even went near Luna," Mrs. Russell reminded her. "If you'd had as much trouble as I've had, you wouldn't meet any more till you had to. Maybe he did go back to get money for a lawyer, just as you thought. Don't you think so?" she turned appealingly to Peter.

Peter looked up from the grass blade which he was intently tying into knots.

"We'll hope so," he said absently. "But they've kept watch on the trains."

"I don't believe he'd take a train. Oh, why didn't I think of that before?" Mrs. Tanner's voice broke with trembling eagerness. "Why, it would just kill him to think of spending any more money than he had to, after he thought I'd lost the twenty thousand. Almost the first thing he said when I met him at the train was how he'd watched people out of the car windows, stopping automobiles and getting rides. He said he might have saved a lot coming that way himself, if

he'd thought about it. He's always been that way—a great one for saving. And if he knew he'd have to spend a lot on a lawyer, well, it would be just like him to try to get back some of it by saving car fare."

"I'm sure he'll be found." The words rang with an intolerably false heartiness in his own ears, but Peter longed to give what comfort he could. There might be trouble enough ahead for Mrs. Tanner, without his adding to her anxiety.

A clear picture of Tanner had formed in his mind—hard-headed, close-fisted, irascible, domineering. Not the type to form a deliberate plan of murder—but canny enough to look out for his own safety afterwards. Tanner might even have been Miller's mysterious stranger—supposing that stranger, after all, had a real existence. Miller might have misunderstood the words of Luna's pleading, the cry of "Earl."

But in that case, what did the love letters have to do with it? They didn't fit in. Tanner would not care how many lovers Luna had, so long as she had his twenty thousand dollars. Peter tore the knots, one by one, from his blade of grass and threw the remnant away, puzzling over this new problem. But the love letters might be a blind. Perhaps that was just it—perhaps they really did have nothing to do with it! Impossible to make all of the pieces fit together—but some of those pieces might have been put there for that very purpose, extra pieces, that didn't fit. If Tanner had looked for money, whether he found it or not, he might have found the letters and left them in a conspicuous place.

Professional criminals worked more or less by routine. They looked ahead, and you could know or guess what they might do. But there was no way on earth of telling how a man would react to an absolutely unprecedented situation. He would be keyed to an abnormal pitch, would seize at the wildest, most improbable devices of self-protection. Peter

tried to imagine what measures he himself would take if he had just committed a murder, and confessed himself baffled.

"Still," he said, "Mrs. Russell is right. Nobody knows that he was in the house at all. There are other possibilities—lots of them. We can't possibly tell a thing till we find him, Mrs. Tanner. But he's not the only person that might have done what you fear—not by a long sight!"

Peter winced at the sudden violence of the hand that clutched his knee. Mrs. Russell was staring at him with dark, distended eyes.

"Not—not my boy? Not Charlie?" she cried, and Peter flinched as if her pain had been the lash of a whip across his face. Never before, he thought, had he heard such mortal anguish in a human voice.

CHAPTER XXIV

With the agonized terror of that pleading voice still in his ears, Peter hesitated.

"I don't know anything against your son—anything to connect him with this affair," he said, forcing himself to look up at the strained face bending forward above him.

It was a worn, shriveled face, the skin wrinkled like the shell of a walnut and of the same faded tan color. Mrs. Russell had had no time in her harried, poverty-shrunken life to attempt to stave off the encroachments of age. Peter wondered if those sunken, tragic eyes had ever looked out on the world with hope and happiness. Her thin breast under the faded cotton dress rose and fell in a spasmodic sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad!" she breathed. "I've been thinking—maybe I did wrong to bring him here. Maybe God was going to punish me for it. He's all I have, and I've tried so hard! He's not a bad boy, really. It's cruel to judge him as if he was like other boys. He can't help it. There's always been something wrong with him." She spoke with a hasty volubility, as if she were beating down with her words the anxiety that still persisted under her surface relief.

It was true—almost true, at any rate. There was nothing against Charlie Russell, nothing one could take hold of, nothing except that furtive concealment of his hand and the unmistakable fear in his mother's eyes. Behind that fear lay what? Knowledge, suspicion, a mother's quick sensitiveness, alert to forestall even non-existent danger, a mother's

dauntless will to protect her son, no matter what he had done?

"You've had trouble with him?" Peter asked, feeling his way carefully.

"I've done all I could to look after him. It's harder, of course, now that he's such a big boy. But he's never done anything really bad—I'm sure he wouldn't. When he got into trouble before, it was just mischief. He was led on by the others, and then they got away and let him take all the blame. It was bad companions that did it. He'd never think up anything wrong by himself." The trembling voice hurried on, still with that uneasy eagerness of defense. "Everything always gets blamed on Charlie, just because he isn't quite like the others. You're sure—sure they don't think——?"

"Up to the present time, the police have no reason whatever to suspect Charlie of anything at all," Peter reassured her. That much, at least, was strictly true.

"Oh!" Again the jerking, tremulous sigh clutched at her throat. "Ever since the police caught my boy, three years ago, I've been—scared. He was out with a bad bunch, but they were the ones that led him into it. He'd never have gone alone. They held up couples in cars—petting parties. Charlie didn't know how wrong it was. He just went along with the others, but he was the only one they got. He was only sixteen. The judge was a real nice man. He gave Charlie probation when I promised I'd look after him. But I was scared. They tried to take him away from me and put him in an institution, among strangers, and I couldn't bear that. He never could quite get along as fast as the others at school, but he's smart enough, some ways. They said he was a borderline case, and let me keep him. But ever since I've hardly slept nights. I've been so worried for fear they might take him away."

Peter recalled the close-set, opaque black eyes and the rat-

like profile of Charlie Russell—a queer, warped face, spoiled in the making, the sort of face, it was easy to say with slangy cynicism, "that only a mother could love." And it was literally true. Those expressionless dull eyes must look out on an obscure and lop-sided world, but to his mother life had felt the touch of one consuming flame—to make the world a safe place for her son.

If she had been rich, he would have been kept out of sight, tended by watchful tutors. But she was poor, and the most she could do was to keep him out of an institution. Peter, frowning intently at the ground, was utterly certain that if Mrs. Russell's son committed murder his mother would fight with concentrated tenacity to shield him. Still, there wasn't any reason, that Peter could see, why he should have committed murder. Only the extremity of his mother's fear was in itself a betrayal that there was something to hide, something which called upon her with an urgent need for her protection.

"If any harm comes to Charlie now, it'll be a judgment on me," she moaned, her face twisting with the effort to hold back the tears that burned her eyelids.

"No, don't say that." Mrs. Tanner reached out an awkward, comforting hand. "I wouldn't be surprised if it was really true that there was a spell on him, and Luna would have found the way to fix it."

Mrs. Russell shook her head in mournful denial.

"I ought to have known no good could come of it. Look what it's brought to both of us—nothing but trouble. But I was desperate. I'd prayed, and praying didn't help. Witchcraft's wicked, and I knew it. But I was ready to try anything, wicked or not, if it would take the curse off my boy. If he'd had the evil eye put on him, and Luna was able to take it away, I didn't care if she did it by the wiles of Satan. I believe she really was a witch. We know there were witches in old times, and why not now? And Charlie's all I have

left. If I was sent to hell for saving him, I wouldn't care. It seemed like a message—a sign to tell me what to do—when I heard about Luna just after my husband died. It wouldn't have done any good before that. We've always had just enough money to scrape along. But there was a thousand dollars' insurance."

"And you gave her that thousand dollars?"

"It was all I had," Mrs. Russell said with meek apology, misinterpreting the anger that roughened Peter's voice. "She told me she'd find out the spell that would make him right. But she didn't. She didn't have time, I guess. But I'll tell you what I think. Don't let them get after Charlie, the way they did before! Why, he'd say anything—anything at all, without realizing how it'd sound. Don't let them punish me like that for listening to the temptation of Satan! I'll tell you who I believe it was. I believe it was somebody that knew she was a witch, and was afraid of her spells, and killed her for it. Folks have done that before, I know. But it couldn't have been Charlie. I know it couldn't!"

"He knew about her, then? He believed that she was a witch?"

"It doesn't matter whether he did or not!" The sunken eyes blazed down on Peter with sudden fierceness. "He couldn't have done it, I tell you. Why—why, he was right with me all that evening and night. He wasn't out of my sight one minute of the time."

Mrs. Tanner drew her breath sharply in a gasp of surprise. Peter glanced at her quickly, in time to see her lips part, then close again leaving her comment unspoken. He turned back to Mrs. Russell with speculative scrutiny.

"That is fortunate," he said quietly. "Charlie does have a habit of wandering out by himself at night, doesn't he?" Someone had given him that hint. Miller. That was it. Miller had bidden him ask Mrs. Russell why she was frightened by Charlie's night prowlings.

"Yes—yes—but not that night! I'm sure of it now. I remember it perfectly." Mrs. Russell's voice rose shrill and emphatic.

"If you have a complete alibi for him, you have no reason to be worried."

Mrs. Russell twisted uneasily in her chair under Peter's steady, inquiring gaze.

"I thought—I thought they might try to blame it on my boy, the way he's always getting blamed for things. I didn't want him to be bothered, that's all."

"And at first you weren't sure whether he'd been out that night or not. You were afraid, if he had, the police might question him, and perhaps be suspicious of him because he's been in trouble before and might not be able to make satisfactory answers. You were so worried that you spoke to Mrs. Tanner about it."

Peter watched Mrs. Tanner's face as he spoke. There was no doubt that he had guessed correctly the meaning of her involuntary movement of surprise when Mrs. Russell had asserted her absolute assurance of Charlie's whereabouts on the night of the murder.

"Afterwards you remembered. Is that it?"

"That's it. That's how it was. I didn't exactly remember at first," Mrs. Russell panted. "That's just exactly how it was," she repeated, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes as if she had escaped some imminent danger and found a haven of peace.

"And the gun? I suppose he had a gun when he held up the petting parties. You were afraid the police would find it? I wonder why they didn't."

"No!" The word was a single sharp explosion of sound. "He hasn't any gun. It's—gone!" Her hand fluttered to her mouth, as if, too late, she would push back the last words.

"You mean it's lost?"

"It was just an old rifle his father used to have. I never let him use it. I kept it hidden. He didn't know where it was."

"And it's still right there where you always kept it?"

"Not now. I got tired of having it around. I—I threw it away." The words were mumbled through stiff lips.

Peter rose to his feet and laid a friendly arm across the bowed, angular shoulders of the woman in the chair.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but it's my business to get at the truth if I can. A good many things might have happened—things that don't touch your son at all. But if you've let yourself get frightened into saying things that aren't true, you can't really help Charlie that way. You can't make the facts any different by being afraid of them—and denying them, you know."

Mrs. Russell's lips quivered, then tightened. She lifted her eyes, staring past him into space.

"It's the truth. I swear it," she said resolutely.

Peter guessed the effort which those words cost her. With her wide blank gaze fixed on the distant horizon she defied what she held sacred as the laws of God, even as she would defy the laws of man if they threatened danger to her son. And the tragic irony of it was that the gravest suspicion yet cast upon Charlie was the black shadow of his mother's haunting fear.

As he made his way slowly back to Jackson's lodge, Peter was certain of three things: that Charlie Russell literally believed himself to be the victim of witchcraft, and feared and hated Luna's boasted powers, stripped of their mystical wrappings until only the core of evil potency remained in the tortuous darkness of his mind; that Mrs. Russell's proffered alibi was a lie born of frantic fear; and that she knew that Charlie had had access to a gun and either knew where it was or was terrified because she did not know.

"And yet there's not one shred of tangible evidence

against him," Peter muttered. "Any one of them might have done it, and they couldn't all have been in it, and there's not a single scrap of real proof against the whole parcel of them. You can figure it half-a-dozen different ways, and each of them has as good a chance of being wrong as the next!"

CHAPTER XXV

PETER sat with his long chin clamped between curved palms, his elbows resting on his knees, his lank frame angled into a corner of the low front stoop of Jackson's cabin.

"Motive!" he snorted. "Everybody's got a motive. Everybody's hiding something. Everybody acts like a person with a reason to be afraid of being found out. If you could forget all the others and work on just one, you might have a chance of getting somewhere—only when you got there it'd probably be the wrong place. When you stick 'em up separately, and try to figure out the logic of it, it might be Vincent or Ruth or the Hodgson girl or Tanner or Miller or Charlie Russell. But when you try to figure them all together, it's enough to make you dizzy. And as for proof—say, if I saw one single little solid fact that didn't change its shape while I was looking at it, I'd faint from sheer amazement!"

The blind man heard him out in silence, his gnarled hands, twisted as the roots of trees, hanging between his knees.

"The Good Book says that darkness was on the face of the waters," he said with a slow solemnity that held Peter's attention, despite the apparent irrelevance of his words. If the old man's wits were wandering, they wandered in high places. "But it didn't stay dark. The Lord, He said, 'Let there be light; and there was light.' There's two kinds of darkness. There's them that walk in darkness because they can't see their way ahead, and there's them that have eyes and see not. It ain't your fault if it's still dark. You used your eyes as good as you could. That's how I know you're him that was sent. The spirit of darkness is on this place.

The spirit of fear is on it. You can't see it, and you can't touch it, but you can feel it. Because you can feel the things that can't be seen, you'll use your eyes to see when the light comes. That's why you were sent."

Peter watched the broad old face, with its scorings of wrinkles, rough and dark as the bark of a tree, to which the blank, sightless eyes gave an immobility of expression like a brown mask. He had never before noticed how hard it was to read the faces of the blind.

"Well, nobody seems very anxious to strike a match," he said in a tone less flippant than his words. "Even you have been holding things back. You didn't say anything about Miller giving you that liquor."

"There's more than that I've held back, waiting for the right time. There wasn't any hurry."

"Hurry!" Peter exclaimed. "Don't you know that every day counts? You've got to get after things while they're hot. That's what's driving me nearly wild. If I waste time on the wrong track, the right one will be getting cold and then we'll more likely than not miss it altogether."

The old man shook his head in slow rebuke.

"The Lord and the devil, they know how to wait," he said. "Those policemen, rushing around like chickens with their heads cut off—they don't wait to know where they're at. Like as not, if I'd talked to them, they'd have clapped me in jail just to be doing something. My place was here. They say a murderer always comes back. I don't know who he is yet, but I want to be here when he comes."

"It'd be convenient if they always did come back—but I'm afraid they most usually don't," Peter contradicted. "The old idea of revisiting the scene of the crime had too many practical disadvantages for the criminal. I suppose it might sometimes happen, but it's not worth counting on."

"Maybe not—maybe not. There's lots of old sayings that folks don't take much stock in any more. But here's where it

happened, and here's where I'm going to stay. There's things went on that night that the police don't know about."

"You mean, you weren't asleep? You know what happened? And you didn't tell it?"

"I didn't tell it, because it don't make sense—not yet. Facts are dangerous things to throw around, when you don't know the meaning of 'em. I wasn't going to give 'em to just anybody. So I waited. You got to be mighty smart to get around the devil. You can't do it just by blustering around, making a big noise. That'd be too easy."

Peter squirmed with impatience. He dared not rouse the old man's antagonism; if he made up his mind to silence, neither threats nor strategy would shake him. But the movement, slight as it was, caught Jackson's quick ears. He answered it with a deep, throaty chuckle.

"You're just most busting yourself to keep still," he said. "But you don't tell me I've got to say more than I've made up my mind to say. That's what the others did. And that's why I paid 'em out by not saying anything at all."

"I'd like to have been present," Peter murmured appreciatively. He could well imagine the blank wall of uncommunicativeness which Jackson had presented to the most insistent questioning. There was an element of sheer stubborn contrariness in his refusal to be coerced, but there was something more. A man who saw in Luna's death a war of cosmic forces, of eternal good and evil, and had set himself, at the peril of his life and his soul, the problem of outwitting the Prince of Darkness, would not be overawed by the task of outwitting the homicide squad.

"If you was to shut your eyes and try to feel your way around," the old man went on in his heavy, deliberate voice, "you'd have all the facts that was there, but you'd get lost because you couldn't tell what they meant. That's what I learned when I lost my sight. It's understanding things, not seeing 'em, that makes their meaning come clear. We're

both blind men, you and me, bumping around in the dark. But you've got glimmerings of sense. You know you're just feeling your way among things you don't understand. You don't think you can see everything with your eyes. You didn't look at me and see just an old, blind, ignorant black man that you could turn inside out in two minutes. There are things that I know. I know there was a curse laid on Luna—a powerful curse. It was the working of that curse that led me to drink Miller's liquor and let the devil in to do his work that night."

"Do you mean—a literal curse? A real person that came here?" Peter said respectfully. They moved in different mental worlds, but the respect was genuine. He was glad he had recognized the quality of untutored strength in the old man's mind. Peter could not accept Jackson's premises, but given those premises his intelligence was sound and whole. It had nothing in common with the chicanery by which Luna had played on the fears and desires of her victims, herself a victim of warring impulses.

Superstition? Of course it was. But it was superstition in the grand style. The doors of that antique world were shut to the modern mind. Its outlines were reduced to manageable proportions. But Peter was glad that, though he had to believe the old man mistaken when he invoked the supernatural, he had not believed him to be merely silly. He had an uneasy intuition that Jackson would have instantly detected any taint of insincerity or contempt in the voice of the man who spoke to him.

"He came several times—but never inside the gate. He stood outside and called down the curse of God upon this place. He came that night. The first time he came, I told Luna. She must have known who he was, for she came out to the gate herself, which she almost never did. But he had gone. He stood and cursed her and went away. 'I'm sorry he's gone,' she said. 'I wanted to tell him I'm not afraid of

his God. I played against his God, and won. I want him to know that I won!' "

"He didn't threaten her with physical violence?"

The old man's voice boomed out with a vibrant solemnity.

"He threatened her—with the wrath of God. He cursed her—and she died," he said.

"You mean, the human hands that killed her were working out the fulfillment of the curse?" Peter groped. "Maybe he helped them along. Have you any idea who he is?"

Jackson shook his head.

"I had no chance to learn his face—he never came close enough," he said. "But he is a little man, thin and old. The way he walked—there wasn't much weight to the sound of his steps. He wouldn't much more than come up to my shoulder—his voice wasn't near as tall as yours. An old voice."

"I'm afraid Luna's track was pretty well strewn with people who had a grudge against her," Peter surmised.

"She hated him," Jackson said simply. "She hated him because there was something in him that she had fought and could never conquer. That message—she'd waited for the chance to give it to him. It was something she'd thought about; it didn't come sudden. There wasn't many folks that she needed to defy, but she had to defy him. I think she'd have defied him, even if she'd known she was going to die for it."

"And he came again that night?"

"He came—but I'd already listened to the voice of temptation. I'd taken the bottle Miller brought me." There was neither shame nor apology in Jackson's admission. After all, Peter thought with a sardonic grin, if you thought you'd got drunk in the course of a cosmic arrangement to turn over a human soul to eternal punishment, the lapse itself became a minor detail in a tremendous design.

"Did he try to come in?" Peter asked.

"No, he stayed outside. But I opened the gates and ran after him. I ran down the hill, but I stumbled in the road, and he got away. I shouted, but he wouldn't listen."

"I've got an idea!" Peter jumped to his feet in his excitement. "I think it might have been Luna's father. She'd rebelled against him, but I had the feeling that she was somehow afraid of him. He must have been on her mind that day, for she told me things—about his being a wandering preacher and fanatic. Something of that fanaticism was in her blood. I suppose that's why she wanted him to know that he couldn't scare her. But they were bound together, no matter how far apart they were—bound by their antagonism. Do you suppose he went off his head enough to be really dangerous? Do you think he could——"

"I know he meant harm to Luna—harm to her body and punishment for her soul," Jackson said with profound conviction. "And whatever Luna did to anybody else, she was good to me. I'd have saved her if I could. If I'd caught him," he added, his face distorted with sudden violence, "I'd have made him lift the curse he laid upon her or I'd have wrung his neck in my two hands!"

"Do you think he may have come back?" Peter asked. "Could he have slipped past you?"

Jackson shook his head.

"Not then. But I left the gates open. I meant to lock them when I came back, but I was all shaken up and dizzy from falling in the road. I picked up the bottle Miller'd left. I remember that. I remember other things too—here and there I remember things, like red sparks, lighting up and going out in the dark again." The old man's head dropped forward, as if bowed under the weight of a remorse too heavy to seek relief in words.

"Never mind, we'll straighten it out yet," Peter said with awkward sympathy. "We won't let the devil have things all his own way," he added with sudden inspiration. "We've

still got to fight him, and it's a big job. But he hasn't got the best of us yet. You just tell me, as exactly as you can, what you remember."

"I didn't realize I'd left the gates unlocked till there came a banging on them—how much later that was, I don't know. I came out, but before I could get there, a man came through and rushed past me. It must have been dark by that time, for he brushed against me as if he hadn't seen me."

"A man from outside? That wouldn't be anyone in the colony, then. I don't suppose you could tell whether it was Tanner—or the man you chased down the road?"

"I'd never heard this man's footsteps before. You can recognize footsteps, you know, just the same as faces. Easier, maybe, because you sometimes can't tell a face in the dark, but, dark or light, a person's walk is always the same. No, it was nobody I'd ever heard before. But Luna knew who it was. I heard her door open and she came a little way along the path. She must have heard the noise at the gate. She came to meet him and both of them went into the house."

"You're sure it wasn't the same man who came before? If it should turn out to be her father—of course that's only a wild hunch of mine, but somehow I think it might be—she'd have known him, of course."

"As near as I can recollect, I'd think it was a heavier man. By that time my ears weren't clear, the way they usually are." Jackson shook his head hopelessly. "I was pretty far gone by then—it's hard to tell. But I'd sort of expect him to be big and middle-aged. He didn't walk springy, like a young man."

"That's just what Miller said!" Peter exclaimed. "Miller told me he peeked in at the window and saw a strange man there. I thought he was making it up. But if that's so, Luna was expecting him. Anyway, he wasn't trying to sneak in, if he made all that noise at the gate. It looks as if we might

be getting somewhere at last. Did you let him out when he left? And did you hear the shot? That would be no end important."

"He stayed a long time, but I didn't hear him go. I know it was a long time, because I'd sat here drinking till the bottle was nearly empty, and I went outside and wandered around for a bit. The air felt late—how it is when the light's been drained out of it for a long time. He was still there then, because I heard them."

"Could you hear what they were saying?"

"I heard his voice, but not the words. The words all blurred together. Luna's voice was the loudest. She was telling him not to do something. She was all wrought up and I heard her say, 'Don't do it, Earl!' "

"You couldn't have heard that!" Peter's fist crashed down on the wooden step at his side. "It doesn't make sense. It couldn't have been Earl, I tell you! You've been talking with Miller, and because he said it, you think now that you remember."

It couldn't be true—it mustn't be true! He tried to beat down his uneasiness with clamorous vehemence. Miller had plenty of reason for lying. Jackson was a blind man and more than half drunk at the time.

"I haven't talked with another living soul about what happened that night. Whether it makes sense or not, that's what I heard," Jackson repeated stubbornly. "There's plenty of things I'm not sure of, but I'm sure of that. If things that happen don't make sense, I reckon it's maybe the fault of your sense," he added ruminatively, with one of his rare lapses into the mellow accent of the South.

"I deserved that," Peter admitted meekly. "I wanted facts, and now that I'm getting them, I seem to be worse off than ever. You didn't hear anything more?"

"No, I didn't hear anything more. I sat out here on the

steps. That's the last I remember. I think I'd some idea that if she needed help she'd call and I'd hear her. But when the shot came, I didn't even hear that. I woke up in the morning, stretched out here on the floor. The gates were wide open—and Luna was dead."

CHAPTER XXVI

"THERE are times when it's just one of Nature's cruelties that Jimmy hasn't a tail to wag. Look at him! For all the world like an airedale pup with a juicy old shoe to worry," Lammie, the rewrite man, leaned across his desk to remark to Peter.

"Piper!"

"Hear the joyous bark! I'll bet he's dug up another bone for you. You've sure brightened the corner where you are."

Peter uncoiled his legs from the rung of his chair and slouched to his feet.

" 'His master's voice,' " he murmured.

Jimmy looked up from the front page of the *Herald* "extra," with its right-column banner line, "New Clues in Witch Cult Murder," and tossed the paper aside.

"You've got to get busy on this," he growled. The gleam of satisfaction in his eyes gave way to a distant speculative look. "Smoke up the dope angle. Find out where she got the stuff and how much she was selling. If we can link up the murder with a dope ring, it'll be great stuff. That's one thing. Willie Hames will check up with the police. Robbins is watching the county jail. Willie says Oleson is going to take Miller and Jackson down there to see if they can identify Vincent as the man they heard quarreling with Luna. There's something phoney about that description—unless, of course, Vincent was pretty elaborately disguised, which doesn't sound likely."

"He couldn't disguise his walk," Peter interposed, "and Jackson's almost uncanny at describing people by ear."

"Well, it won't do any good to argue about it," Jimmy snapped. "Robbins will get in touch with you. I don't think, myself, that the identification will come to anything. If it doesn't, your next job is to find out who the man was if it wasn't Vincent. Then you've got to get hold of this old preacher that was Luna's father. He may be out of the picture altogether, but it's worth working on, and nobody else has got wise to it yet."

"Is that all?" Peter drawled sarcastically. "Of course I don't know what Luna's real name was, or what her father's name is, or where he is, or what he looks like. It's only the wildest sort of hunch that he was anywhere near the place. And I suppose I'm to wander around town stopping every middle-aged man I meet and ask him if his name's Earl."

"Hell's bells!" Jimmy groaned. "Do I not only have to tell you what to get, but tie a bib around your neck and feed it to you with a spoon? Here I give you the best murder story that's broken in two years, and all you can do is grouse about it. Since you're too lazy to use your own brains, if any, I suggest that when you get around to it you give the woman's husband a buzz. He ought to know what her maiden name was."

"That's a good idea," Peter said. "I'll try it."

"Thanks," Jimmy jeered. "So glad you like it. I've told the A. P. to check Tanner's home town and give us all the information they can get on him. When Willie calls back, be sure to tell him to keep after the police and let us know if they've found any trace of Tanner. Tell Sammie to call the juvenile probation office and get a complete record of Charlie Russell. We can't use anything on him now, there's too little to go on, but we may dig up something. You'll have to get after Russell yourself and see if you can break that alibi. We've had a lucky break so far, but we're just starting. We've got to keep it alive. We can't lie down on it." Jimmy's eyes were dancing points of light. "Go to it—and

report in as often as you can. I may think up some more lines for you to follow."

"You probably will," Peter agreed fervidly. "But I think I've got enough to hold me for an hour or two."

Lammie was removing the telephone headpiece from his ears as Peter rejoined him.

"Willie just phoned in about a dope raid," the rewrite man said. "There's an angle on it he thought you might be interested in."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you can just tell Willie Hames that I've got enough to interest me right now. Jimmy's all pepped up about this murder, and I'm elected to keep him happy. That man has never grasped the elementary distinction between the possible and the impossible—except that it's the impossible he most generally wants. I suppose," he added, "that's why we all break our necks to get it for him."

"Well, anyway, Willie said to be sure to tell you."

"Shoot, then—but make it snappy," Peter conceded.

Lammie consulted a page of illegible penciled notes before him.

"This raid was on Loo Fong's place—you know, the big importers. They found a lot of dope done up in tea packages. It was all wrapped and addressed to a Chinaman named Chin Lee, at 14 Wadsworth Terrace. They pinched Lee, but he won't talk. They never will, you know."

"We will now pause for a treatise on Oriental psychology," Peter droned.

"I'm coming to it—just wait a minute," Lammie protested. "Willie says the Wadsworth Terrace address is the same as that of Earl Anthony. Chin Lee is his servant, but Anthony came down to the police station at once and said he didn't know anything about it, and Lee backed him up."

"That's the husband that offered the reward for the murderer. We had him in the paper when the story first broke,"

Peter explained. "But you've got his name wrong. It's not Earl, it's Merrill."

"Willie certainly said Earl—at least, it sounded like Earl over the phone," Lammie expostulated.

"It sounded like—— My God, that's it! I've got it!" To Lammie's astonishment, Peter seized him by the shoulder and shook him violently. "How do you pronounce M-e-r-r-i-l? Don't stop to think about it. Quick!" he urged.

"Mer'l!" Lammie gasped. "Just out of curiosity, have you gone completely crazy?"

But Peter did not wait for the conclusion of the question. He had leaped across the open space and was already sprawled halfway across the city editor's desk, sending the telephone spinning out of Jimmy's hand to the floor.

"Listen!" he shouted. "Merrill—Merrul—Merle—Earl! Get it? That's who it was! Maybe she got her dope from Chin Lee. But whether she did or not, that's who the middle-aged man was—it was her husband. Merrill Anthony. They heard her call him 'Merrill,' slurred together till it sounded like 'Merle,' and they took it for Earl. Both of them were familiar with the name of Earl Vincent and it's the easiest thing in the world to mistake a strange name for a familiar one."

Jimmy drew up the telephone receiver hand over hand by its cord and restored it to his ear.

"Switch this call to Ward," he said into the transmitter. "Boy!" he shouted in stentorian tones. "Get all the clippings on Merrill Anthony out of the library, and step on it. See if they can dig up a cut of him. I know they've looked before, but tell them to hunt again." Then he turned to Peter. "Why the excitement?" he beamed. "Didn't I tell you you could find out who it was if you got to work on it and used your brains?"

"But it wasn't work, nor brains either," Peter stammered. "It was just damn fool luck."

"See that you have some more luck then—you'll need it," Jimmy grunted happily. "We can't touch this with a ten-foot pole till we've proved it up to the hilt. If we go around suggesting that Merrill Anthony is a dope distributor and likely as not a murderer, we'd be in a libel suit up to our necks. The graveyard is full of the corpses of good stories that had to be killed for that very reason, and nothing to be done about it but weep salt tears over their graves. I don't want to be chief mourner over this one. If I am, I'll make you sweat blood, so just bear that in mind."

"It all fits together as cute as a crossword puzzle," Peter caroled, his eye wide and shining. "Luna had some sort of business connection with her husband—Vincent told me that. Luna was in touch with a supply of dope, and the dope from Loo Fong's place was addressed to Anthony's house. They were in the dope racket together, sure as shooting. And Anthony was there the night Luna was killed. Maybe they quarreled about the dope business, or maybe he was jealous. Anyway, he was threatening her."

Jimmy looked up from a perusal of the clippings which he had spread fan-wise on the desk before him.

"You think you've got a great story. Well, you haven't," he said crushingly. "You haven't even begun to get it, so don't throw your hat into the air yet awhile. All you've got is a series of hunches—and the *Herald* doesn't print hunches. You've got to turn every one of those hunches into iron-clad facts—and from the success with which Anthony has kept himself out of the papers in the past, it's not going to be exactly pie. There's absolutely nothing here." He tossed the clippings into the wire basket at his elbow.

"I know," Peter said mournfully. "I looked them up before. He's not only a 'retired capitalist,' he's a goldarned retiring one. Cliff says he wouldn't even stand for shipboard pictures when he came back from his last big-game expedi-

tion—and a big-game hunter that shies away from publicity is rare enough to be a suspicious character."

"Well, see what you can get on it, and my prayers go with you. Only," Jimmy added solemnly, "remember, the *Herald* doesn't print prayers, either."

CHAPTER XXVII

"THERE'S a lady outside to see you—she said you wouldn't know her name."

Peter halted, halfway to the door.

"Thanks for the tip—I'll take the rear elevator. Interviewing strange females is just one of the few things I haven't got time for at the moment. Be a good little liar, Elsie," he wheeled. "Tell her I've gone for the day. Tell her I've been fired. Tell her I'm quarantined with bubonic plague. Tell her Jimmy has finally obeyed that impulse and shot me dead."

The reception clerk, however, stood her ground.

"She said if you were out she'd wait," she said. "She seemed to think it's important."

"They always do," Peter said resignedly. "Tell her I'm running to a fire, but I'll spare her five minutes while the conflagration rages."

A moment later Peter banged the local-room door behind him and catapulted into the reception room, giving an excellent demonstration of a young man in a desperate hurry. A middle-aged woman rose from the extreme edge of the chair where she had been sitting and came timidly forward, extending a shabbily gloved hand that shook with obvious nervousness.

"I—I hope I'm not interrupting," she faltered. "I've never been in a newspaper office before—perhaps I oughtn't to have bothered you. But my conscience wouldn't give me any rest till I came to see you. Maybe I'm just foolish and it doesn't amount to anything, but I—I felt I ought to come."

"I'm sure you did quite right," Peter said in his most reassuring manner. He had not the faintest idea what she was talking about, but there was not much chance of finding out until he had calmed her agitation and set her at ease. With her peering bright eyes and her quaking manner, she was exactly like a little gray mouse peeping out of its hole and expecting to be gobbled up by the cat the next minute.

"You *are* the gentleman who wrote this, aren't you?" She fumbled in her bag and produced a week-old copy of the *Herald*. It was folded with the front page outward, displaying Peter's signed story and a two-column cut of the photograph of Luna which had been found in Vincent's apartment. "And this," she added, pointing with a tremulous finger to the photograph, "this is really a picture of the lady that was killed?"

"Yes, of course it is!" Peter strove to keep his impatience from betraying itself in his voice. Whose picture did she think it was—the Queen of Rumania's?

"You don't mean to say you know something about it?" he added incredulously. Every big story brought its quota of cranks who sought publicity for themselves by offering inconsequential or imaginary information. But this little drab creature for whom the phrase "gentlewoman in reduced circumstances" seemed to have been expressly invented did not look like either a crank or a publicity seeker.

"I don't know—I'm not sure——" The mouse darted back into its hole at the touch of sharpness in Peter's manner. "I couldn't bear the thought of getting mixed up in anything unpleasant. I even hate to read about such things—though of course I know you can't help having to write about them," she added with hasty apology. "But I always do think murder is so very unpleasant, don't you?"

"Yes, quite." Peter's voice was scrupulously grave, but the corners of his mouth twitched uncontrollably.

"I'm sure you must hate having anything to do with something terrible like this." The slender fingers touched the paper in her lap. "And believe me, I wouldn't have bothered you with it if I could think of any other way. I've been hoping it would turn out to be some kind of mistake. But my conscience told me I had no right to be selfish and let my own feelings rule me. I do hope you think I've done right in coming to you. I've never in my life had to do anything so hard."

The catch in her voice made Peter ashamed of his inward squirmings of impatience. The poor old soul was really worried. There was no use trying to hurry her—if she wanted to discourse on her qualms of conscience and pity the sad lot of reporters who were forced to write front-page murder stories, he'd listen quietly if he burst a blood vessel in the attempt!

"Won't you sit down and tell me just what it is that is troubling you, Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Gross. But please, you won't put my name in the paper, will you? I really couldn't bear that!"

"I assure you, we should not dream of using your name without your permission," Peter said soothingly.

"Thank you so much." Mrs. Gross took a long breath as if summoning all her courage. "You see, I'm hostess of the Eldredge furnished apartments. I get my own apartment rent free for looking after the comfort of the tenants. They're very quiet people who live there. I don't mean to say that this lady wasn't quiet, too, only she and her husband weren't home very much. I knew them as Mr. and Mrs. Merrill, but it seems that couldn't have been her real name—not if this is her picture."

"Luna! You mean Luna had an apartment at your place?" Peter exclaimed.

"Yes, but she didn't exactly live there. That is, she and her husband would come in for several hours, and then

leave again. Whenever they came, they had a great many callers. I do hope you won't think I'm a gossip, Mr. Piper. Truly I'm not, and it wasn't my business who came, of course, but I couldn't help noticing that some of them were rather queer-looking people. But since—since this terrible thing happened, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Merrill has been home at all. I thought I might be mistaken—that the picture in the paper was just a chance resemblance. Only several times people came asking for them and seemed very much upset that they weren't home. And the rent is up to-morrow, and I didn't know just what I ought to do about it, so I thought——"

"Mrs. Gross, you're God's gift to the *Herald!*" Peter said fervently. "Blessings on your alabaster brow. This Mr. Merrill, would you know him again if you saw him?"

"I'm not sure that I would. He always wore his hat in the hall, and he'd brush past, so that I never looked at him particularly. I don't believe I'd recognize him on the street. Ought I—ought I to have looked at him more closely?"

"He was taking pains that you shouldn't," Peter conjectured. "But it doesn't matter. The point is, he and Luna had an apartment there—for business purposes, evidently. Luna was killed, and he skipped. He wasn't taking any chances on going back. It was a ten-to-one bet that somebody would link up Luna with the place—she wasn't a woman whose personal appearance would pass unnoticed—but he had a good chance of escaping the connection. It was a dangerous predicament, but with all the publicity of Luna's death, he couldn't risk clearing out altogether—not after the bank book ticketed him as her husband."

"Gracious!" Mrs. Gross turned to Peter with awed admiration. "What a lot of things you do think of, all at once. Why, I never dreamed of all that!"

"You will, when you've had a little more experience in the life of crime," Peter smiled. "Besides, it's mostly guess-

work. But if he hasn't dared to go back, there's a chance some things have been left behind that will make it something more than guess work, unless—— Good grief, woman, you haven't cleaned out the place, have you?"

Mrs. Gross shrank back with alarm at the urgency of Peter's tone.

"No—oh, no!" she gasped. "They're not service apartments, you know."

"Thank God for that," Peter exulted. "Now I'll just go right along with you and have a look at the place. My car's an awful wreck, but you won't mind that, will you?"

"I'd appreciate the kindness of a lift very much, if you're sure it won't take too much of your time," she said with her quaint air of formality. "It's very nice of you not to mind having it all brought up again. I'm sure you'd much rather forget the whole affair and think of more cheerful things."

"I'll try to bear up," Peter assured her solemnly. "And I don't at all mind going out of my way. In fact, it's the very place I would have been going anyway if I'd known it was there."

Mrs. Gross responded to this cryptic utterance with a polite but wholly uncomprehending smile. Newspaper gentlemen were less intimidating than she had expected, but she was beginning to find this particular specimen somewhat bewildering—though, she added to herself, he was really most kind and considerate.

Peter showed his genuine goodness of heart by curbing Bossy's habit of cutting in around trucks, dashing across intersections just as the stop sign flashed, and stopping with a disconcerting suddenness and a jamming of brakes. He even checked the endless repetition of the whistled minor phrase in which his elation sought ear-shattering expression—checked it, in the middle of a bar, for two consecutive blocks.

"*Hoo-oo-oo*—— I beg your pardon," he said contritely, resisting the impulse to nip in front of the car ahead

on a left-hand turn. He had mentally dubbed Mrs. Gross the direct answer to Jimmy's prayers, and the least he could do was to show his gratitude by refraining from frightening her out of her wits.

"I'll just give you my pass key and let you go by yourself, if you don't mind," she said as she followed him somewhat breathlessly into the apartment house. Peter's random suggestions had obviously given the empty apartment the aspect of a Bluebeard's chamber of horrors in her eyes. "It's always been such a nice quiet house. I do hope you won't find anything wrong."

Peter had not the heart to share with Mrs. Gross his ardent hope that he would find something very wrong indeed. Harboring a gang of dope smugglers unawares would almost certainly lack all the elements of appeal to Mrs. Gross, however cheering the idea might be to Peter Piper.

On first examination, however, the apartment was discouragingly bare of signs of personal occupancy. The wastebasket was empty. The writing desk held only a few sheets of blank paper. The grate had been cleared of débris, and the kindling and logs were neatly laid in preparation for an unlighted fire. With a frown of disappointment, Peter kicked idly at the bars of the fireplace. To get a lead like that to follow, and then have it fade to nothing—it couldn't happen! And yet, Peter reflected from bitter experience, that very thing did happen more often than not.

His toe had jarred the little stack of kindlings, and as they shifted their arrangement a sliver fell through the bars to the floor of the grate. Peter stared at it blindly for a moment. Then suddenly he dropped to his knees and thrust exploring fingers into the grate, disregarding the patches of soot that smeared his hands. As he held the recovered bit of wood close to his near-sighted eyes, the still air of the room was split by an unmelodious, wailing cadence.

"Hoo-oo-oo, hu-hu-hu!" whistled Peter. The segment of

wood in his hand was not a mere splinter of kindling. It was a smoothly whittled cylinder narrowed to a point, the exact counterpart of the whittled stick he had picked up in the room where Luna lay murdered.

"Things are looking up," he said aloud, addressing the inanimate object in his hand. "A murderer was caught once because he had a habit of rubbing his chin. Something tells me that somebody is going to wish he didn't whittle."

Still whistling his tune of jubilation, he went to the kitchenette, where he sniffed at the empty bread box and one by one opened the blue and white china jars labeled Salt, Sugar, and Coffee.

"It's a cinch this kitchen wasn't used for cooking," he mused, surveying the vacant shelves of the cupboard and pulling out the empty flour bin. "This place must have been the distribution center for the dope—it couldn't have been anything else. It would be too wild a coincidence to have Luna in some clandestine concern with Merrill Anthony, and the man who whittled a stick in her room on the night of the murder whittling another stick here where she rented rooms with a man who went by the name of Merrill, and dope addressed to Merrill Anthony's house in the name of Chin Lee—and yet to suppose that they weren't in the dope racket together. Nevertheless, as it stands, it's nothing but inference—inescapable inference, but not evidence.

"The man who was here with her went out to her cottage at the colony that night—the stick clinches that. But as for identifying him, Mrs. Gross is no good at all, and Miller could be cracked wide open on cross-examination. He'd lose his temper, and even if he wasn't lying for his own protection, which maybe he is, for all I know, it'd look as if he were. There are two missing links in it—it's got to be shown that Merrill really was the man Luna quarreled with when they thought she said 'Earl'. In that case he's certainly the man that threw his little piece of whittling into the fireplace

here. And if he was, it's still got to be proved that Chin Lee's assignment of tea wasn't a game of his own but was intended to be relayed here for sale."

Peter's search had proceeded to the accompaniment of his argument, but the coffee pot, the tea pot and the assortment of pans in the lower part of the kitchen cabinet yielded nothing of what he sought. He stood in the middle of the floor with closed eyes, trying to visualize Barbara in the kitchen. Where did she put things or throw them away? Thow them away . . . Peter's eyes flew open and he lurched forward, dragging out the covered garbage can from beneath the sink.

It was half filled with crumpled and crushed lead foil, with here and there a scrap of brilliant-hued paper label. The garbage collector, if he drew inferences, would have had to suppose that the family in this particular apartment lived exclusively on tea. Peter laid the empty containers carefully on the sink board and spread them out one by one. Here and there a minute grain of white powder adhered to the corners. He wet his finger and sampled one of the grains with the end of his tongue. Then he shamelessly purloined one of the dish towels from a drawer, made a package of the tea wrappers, and clattered down the stairs.

Here and there a door opened behind him and a head looked curiously out, for Peter's progress was marked by the piercing strains of a weird and melancholy tune, whistled at the top of his exceedingly healthy lungs.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PETER leaned heavily on Jackson's arm as he limped painfully up the long flight of steps which led to the hillside house, set deep among terraced gardens. In his pocket was a brief clipping announcing that the university museum of natural history had accepted the offer of Merrill Anthony to finance and lead an expedition into central Africa. In his head was the information, obtained from Willie Hames, that Chin Lee had appeared confident of an early release from jail as soon as his bail was set, and that, despite his Oriental impassivity, he had shown signs of puzzled uneasiness as the hours stretched into days without effecting his release.

"He didn't turn a hair when the bail was fixed at $5,000," Willie had reported in answer to Peter's telephoned inquiry, "and he hasn't lifted a finger to try to raise the cash himself. But every time the jailer sees him, he asks: 'Money no come yet?' He evidently expected somebody to put it up for him, and is beginning to get anxious, but he won't say anything more."

Peter had turned each of these items over and over in his mind to determine their possible elements of usefulness.

"Compared with me, old Ananias is going to look like George Washington," he told Jackson. "I'd like to have you with me for two reasons. One is that, if I do bluff my way through, I ought to have a witness along. And I'd back your ears for an identification against anybody's eyes."

"When you fight the devil, there's times when you've got to do it with his own weapons," Jackson agreed. "I reckon

the Lord won't look too close if you stretch the truth a little."

"Stretch it? Say, by the time I get started, the truth is going to be made of pure rubber!"

"It's lucky you ain't trying to fool a blind man," Jackson muttered as they climbed the last of the steps and Peter pressed his thumb on the doorbell. "Anybody that listened could tell you was just favoring that foot on purpose."

"Not very expert, I'll admit," Peter said humbly. "But it was the only excuse I could think of for bringing you along."

"You'd better be quiet—somebody's coming."

Peter had not heard the sound of approaching footsteps, but in another moment a man whose dark hair was plentifully sprinkled with gray advanced around the corner of the house.

"I think you must have the wrong house," he said with chill courtesy. "My servant is—out, or he would have come to the door to direct you."

"Oh, I hope not." Peter looked somewhat dashed. "I'm not used to having to hobble around like this, but I slipped on a step—such a silly thing to do—and gave my ankle a nasty wrench. These modern methods—the doctor thinks I ought to use it as much as I can and not be dependent on crutches or it may get stiff on me," he rattled on with easy volubility. "But I dragged Albert away from his gardening to give me a strong arm to lean on now and then. This is the first time I've tried such a long walk, and I don't mind admitting it was maybe a bit too much."

Peter beamed with a bland assurance that the world, including any casual stranger, would be deeply interested in his ankle. Then his face twisted with sudden pain.

"It's the very devil, being bunged up like this," he said pathetically. "If you'd let me sit down for a few minutes—and maybe a glass of water . . ."

The older man glanced sharply at Peter's ingenuous coun-

tenance, then fitted his latchkey into the door. "I'll get you a glass of water—you might sit down on the step," he said.

But Peter had evidently not heard the strong hint conveyed in the latter part of the sentence. He hobbled through the door directly behind Anthony and dropped with a sigh of relief into the nearest chair, still clinging to Jackson's arm as he lowered himself with a groan.

With a slight shrug of his shoulders Anthony turned his back and departed kitchenward. Peter would have given much at that moment if Jackson had had the use of his eyes and could have answered his inquiring glance. He dared not risk a whispered question. The huge brown hand of the old negro reached forward and gripped his fingers tightly—but whether the pressure was a mere warning for silence or a signal that the voice and footsteps of Anthony had been recognized, he could not tell.

The large square hall in which they sat was covered with the stretched skins of tigers and leopards, their grinning heads peering up from the floor. On the walls were ranged row upon row of mounted heads, staring out with wide glassy eyes between branched and twisted horns. They must have been beautiful once—beautiful and fleet and alive. Something of the grace of lost life still clung to the smooth brown coats of their rounded necks and softly furry ears and proudly lifted antlers. All that beauty and grace of life destroyed, that their heads might hang in rows upon a wall as trophies to the lust of destruction in man. Peter shivered a little under the serried ranks of dead, accusing eyes. He followed the direction of their motionless gaze to the opposite wall, where guns and heavy pistols were ranged in a complicated geometric pattern—the destroyed facing the means of their destruction.

Would the man whose joy was in the destruction of life hesitate to take a human life that stood in his way? Would he shrink from extracting the means for all this luxury

from the weakness of human beings? Peter knew that his imagination was running away with him—it was absurd to think that because a man was a big-game hunter he was also a criminal. But character counted—every object in the room except for its purely utilitarian furniture bore witness to the callousness that came with wholesale destruction. If Peter shot an animal—even one of those magnificent tawny tigers with their black shadow-stripes—he was quite certain that he would not like to have it looking at him for the rest of his life as a testimony to the egoism of man, glorying in his power of death.

Even while he acknowledged that the mood evoked by the room was partly due to the squeamishness of overwrought nerves, he leaned forward to examine more closely the pattern of guns above the fireplace. Each one was a heavy and expensive weapon. Could Merrill Anthony be expected to own a cheap, worn rifle, in such poor condition that the rifling left no distinctive marks on the bullets fired from it?

But, of course, with all that he must know about firearms, he would know that, too. He would never risk using a weapon that could be traced to him as conclusively as if he had scratched his signature on the surface of the bullet. If Merrill Anthony was a criminal, he would be as cool as he was ruthless. It was useless to expect the carelessness of unsteady nerves from a man who, if he had killed his wife, was capable of the colossal cynicism of offering a reward for the apprehension of her murderer.

He half rose to move over to the fireplace, but Jackson's hand on his coat tugged him back as Anthony reëntered the room, a glass of water in his hand. Peter mechanically noted that the glass was carried in his right hand. Then his intent face relaxed into a somewhat fatuous cordiality.

"You know, I'm not in the wrong house after all," he said with the air of making a happy discovery. "I saw in

the paper that you were organizing an expedition for hunting some kind of wild animals, and I thought right away that it would be a great lark to go along. As soon as I could take my foot off the chair, I came over to let you know I'd like to join you. I've been awfully interested in you for a long time, Mr. Anthony."

"There is no reason why anyone should be even slightly interested in me." The words came with the toneless click of metal. "My affairs are no concern of the public. And the expedition is a private one."

"Well, of course," Peter remarked cheerfully, "I can see why you had to let the papers announce it. That didn't seem a bit like you, till I thought it over. You know, you have the reputation of being quite a hermit. But naturally, in your recent—er—bereavement, it wouldn't do to let people get to wondering whether maybe you weren't interested in keeping the truth from coming out, so you had to give out that reward, even if you don't like publicity. And if you just disappeared, it might look queer, so you took care to let the papers know that you're going out of the country."

Peter, watching the face of the man who lounged against the mantelpiece, wondered why it suddenly bore a startling, though undefined, resemblance to the staring heads on the wall. Anthony's big frame drew itself together and his eyes narrowed with the effort of determining whether Peter's idle chatter concealed a deeper meaning. No, it was only one eye that responded to the twitching lids. The other still stared, wide and bright, like the eyes on the wall.

Peter's fingers gripped the arms of his chair while his mind seemed to take a tailspin through space. With an almost physical lurch, he groped for the significance of the subtle loss of symmetry in the face before him. Those glass eyes on the wall—why, of course! One of the man's eyes was glass —the right eye. The man wasn't left-handed, but he was

left-*eyed!* That awkward, left-handed knife thrust—its awkwardness was obvious enough now. The man who must sight with his left eye and shoot left-handed must often have had to correct the assumption that he was left-handed in other activities. He would be conscious of his hands, as the ordinary person never thought of being. He had killed always with his left hand. He would kill again with his left hand—and the search for a left-handed criminal would leave him serene and safe. Peter surveyed the man by the mantelpiece with an odd sense of detachment. The eyes on the wall had their revenge in death—it was they that had betrayed their destroyer.

"I don't know what you mean, and I don't care to know." Anthony was obviously confused and uncertain, but wary. "There is really nothing I care to discuss with you, Mr.——"

"Piper." Peter said calmly. "Peter Piper of the *Herald.*"

"I have no statements to make to the press, and I consider this a most unwarrantable intrusion. You have entered my house under false pretenses——"

"Oh, quite," Peter agreed with a winsome smile. "It was the only way to get in."

If Peter had hoped to goad Anthony into a loss of control he was disappointed.

"There are several ways to get out," he said drily, "but perhaps you will find the front door most convenient."

Peter rose and turned. Jackson towered behind him, his hands coiled like brown roots across the back of the chair.

"Shall we go?" he asked. It flashed across his mind that a rather elaborate arsenal lay within reach of Anthony's hand. His knees felt curiously fluid as he turned his back on the menacing figure by the mantel, but he forced himself to disregard it. Would Jackson realize the import of his question? Would he answer, not the mere words, but the meaning which lay behind them?

Jackson's voice when he spoke had the deep organ tones

which Peter had learned to recognize as a reversion to his long-abandoned, ancestral Southland, reappearing only in moment of deep feeling.

"I can't speak for you, Mr. Piper," he said. "But as for me, I'm staying right here till I know what this man here did to Luna when he came out there, that night she got killed!"

CHAPTER XXIX

ANTHONY's fingers clutched the edge of the mantel as if he would tear the shelf from the wall.

"I wasn't there." The words seemed to be forced from him, almost against his will. He cleared his throat huskily, then raised his voice threateningly. "I don't owe you any explanation of anything. I'll tell you that much, and that's all. Now get out before I throw you out!"

But his face did not reflect the indignation of his speech. Peter, leaning forward with straining nerves, noted how the skin sagged in pallid folds below his cheek bones. Men might grow pale from anger, but this man's gaze was not turned upon his antagonists but down at his hands. He was abysmally afraid! The discovery rang like a bell in Peter's brain. Fear had eaten into him, leaving only a hollow shell.

"Throw me out?" Jackson's gray head was thrown back. Peter felt the wood of the chair creak under the grip of his mighty hands. "I don't budge from this spot till you tell me what you done to her. I know you. I was there. I heard you."

"What is this, a blackmail scheme? It's utterly ridiculous. Why, the man is stone blind!"

"That is exactly what will make his identification so convincing to a jury," Peter said. "We all know that we're likely to make mistakes in recognizing people. A clever lawyer can almost always throw a hint of doubt, of mistaken identity, into the minds of men and women who have made the same mistake themselves. But Jackson can throw a little demonstration that will make them believe him if he said

he heard the grass growing. Because his powers exceed theirs, they won't know where to place any limit on them. If a dozen men were paraded across the courtroom, and Jackson listened and then identified each one by his footsteps when they were shuffled up and marched across the room in a different order, any jury would be convinced when he swore it was you he heard that night."

While Peter spoke, his mind, below the surface of his words, shuttled busily back and forth, sorting and revising his impressions of the man by the mantel. The revelation of something near panic behind the boldness of his denial had come as a surprise, upsetting all of Peter's preconceptions. He could not put aside the swift conviction that Anthony, at the first hint of danger, had lost his head. Cruel, unscrupulous, and self-seeking he might be, so long as he could stalk his prey from ambush, but there was no real fight in him, not even for self-protection. His bluster had sounded like lines spoken in a play, and badly spoken at that. Peter's ruthless antagonist collapsed before his eyes. Tigers or no tigers, the man was a coward when faced by a peril which could not be met with a gun.

"Suppose I was there—and I haven't admitted I was. Suppose I did call on my wife. That isn't any crime." Anthony stooped and mechanically stripped off a sliver from a piece of kindling in the firebox. With a nervous automatic gesture he drew a knife from his pocket and began to whittle the stick with small, sharp strokes. "You haven't told anybody, have you?"

"Not yet," Peter said tersely. "But the police will be interested. Your trip is very likely to be postponed."

"We might—be able to fix it up. How about coming to a business arrangement?" Anthony's eyelid flickered upward. "I might make it worth your while——"

"You want to get away pretty bad, don't you? And you want your little visit, which you don't admit paying but

which wasn't a crime, kept dark? Well, maybe it depends on how much of the truth you care to tell about it."

"I'm not telling anything!" Anthony retreated, with weak stubbornness in his harassed, high-pitched voice.

"Lord, what a simple soul you are! If tigers had brains, you'd never have brought any skins home," Peter commented with impudent cheerfulness. "I somehow don't think you'd ever have killed her out of jealousy. All you care about is feathering your own nest and saving your skin and letting somebody else do the worrying. More likely she threatened you with exposure and you had to get her out of the way."

"No, it wasn't that! Before God, I didn't kill her! I don't know anything about it." The half-whittled stick fell with a clatter to the hearth. The knife had slipped, cutting a gash in Anthony's finger. With a swift movement Peter reached forward, picked up the fragment of wood, and slipped it into his pocket.

"No? Well, do you know anything about dope smuggling, then? Do you know anything about the Eldredge apartments?"

"No! I don't know anything, I tell you. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then, of course, you'll be willing to give me that knife to submit to an expert. He can tell whether the same knife whittled the stick that was found in Luna's room the morning after the murder, and the stick that was found in the dope-selling headquarters. He might also tell whether it was the knife that stabbed Luna. May I have it?" Peter extended his hand with a polite smile.

Anthony held the knife balanced on the palm of his hand. Then he slowly shut it and dropped it into his pocket.

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"It doesn't matter," he said indifferently. "I've all three sticks—one of them I can swear is yours, and if the knife

marks on it tally with those on the other two—— Well, it'll be just too bad for you."

"And if I did go to the Eldredge apartments, it doesn't prove anything. I went to see my wife on private business. I don't know what she was doing—what anyone was doing." Anthony's physical body still stood erect by the mantelpiece. But as Peter looked at that shrinking figure, he had the impression of a man being forced step by step backward.

Peter sighed, loudly and dramatically.

"You were very silly not to pay Chin Lee's bail," he chided. "You thought you could scuttle for cover and leave him in the lurch. You were afraid of paying it. You thought you could keep out of it and let him do the paying. You're the most inartistic liar I've ever met—and foolish besides. Chin Lee has told everything." Peter flung out the last sentence in a magnificent climax. When it came to lying, he'd show how the thing should be done with proper verve!

The figure by the mantelpiece crumpled before his eyes. Slowly, as if moving independently of conscious will, it slumped into a chair.

"Can't we settle this—somehow?" he pleaded hoarsely.

"I'll listen to what you have to say," Peter said noncommittally, "but it'd better be the truth. After I've listened, I'll let you know what it's worth to me to keep still. But it'll be an awful waste of time for you to lie—you do it so badly."

"Oh, it's easy enough for you! You don't know what it's like to be used to money all your life. Did you ever hear of By Low Soothing Syrup?"

The question was so unexpected that Peter could only shake his head in bewildered denial.

"My father made it. He made a fortune with it—you're too young to remember, I suppose. It used to be advertised everywhere. Then the bad luck began."

Anthony lifted his head from his hands. Despite his flaccid

face and graying hair he looked at that moment like a child unaccountably abused by a wilfully unjust world. "Some fool mother gave her baby an overdose, and the child died. The family sued the maker, and it came out that there was laudanum in the stuff. The papers made a campaign of it—it was a fearful mess." Anthony shuddered at the recollection. "The publicity ruined the sales—and anyway, of course the laudanum had to be left out of the formula after that and the soothing syrup wasn't any good without it. My father died in the midst of the yelping."

Peter looked wonderingly at the aggrieved face before him. There was no doubt at all that the man sincerely believed himself to be the victim of undeserved misfortune. He was telling the truth as the truth looked to him—and Peter reflected that there were times when a man telling the truth was a less attractive moral object than the most brazen liar.

"So when the baby trade fell off, you took to selling the dope to adults." In the effort to conceal his disgust, Peter's tone was brusquely matter-of-fact.

"Not at first. I never was a business man—Father had attended to everything. He left quite a lot of money, but I'd never been brought up to take charge of things. When the money began to run low—well, what else was I to do?" The question was obviously rhetorical. Anthony's glance around the luxurious room indicated the grotesque impossibility of expecting him to accept a pinchbeck existence.

"And when things cracked up, you thought it right and proper to leave Chin Lee holding the bag—somebody always having held it for you?" Peter's voice was a cool trickle of scorn.

"But there wasn't anything else to do!" The indignant self-justification in Anthony's voice was indubitably genuine. "I couldn't be dragged through all that mud of publicity. Why, I'd even had to drop my last name years ago so that

nobody would connect me with my father. I couldn't afford to get mixed up in it. Anyway, it was really Luna who attended to the—the business arrangements. After she left me, she wanted to drop it. All very nice for her, she had a good thing of her own. But what about me? I couldn't handle it alone. I told you I was no good at business."

"No, I don't suppose you could handle so much as a peanut stand," Peter agreed drily. He longed to stab the colossal vanity that made even incompetence a matter of complacency. "You must have had some uncomfortable moments, knowing what an inferior specimen you'd appear if the truth about you were known. By jiminy, that explains it! That's why you killed all these things and set 'em up to look at. You had to be a hero to yourself somehow—everybody does, I guess, but you had a tougher job of it than most. You had to sneak out of sight of the humanity that would despise you—so you got your glory out of demonstrating that a man with a gun can shoot an animal dead. But that's off the subject. You killed Luna, I take it, because she was going to give you away."

"But I didn't kill her, I told you!" Anthony's voice rose almost to a shriek.

"So you did," Peter said, as if the point had slipped his memory until called to his attention. "Still, two people heard her pleading with you for her life."

"But that—that's impossible! Why on earth should I want to kill her?" Desperation had evidently improved Anthony's powers of acting—his expression was one of almost ludicrous perplexity.

"Do you mean to say it wouldn't be useful to you to have her out of the way, with all her inside knowledge?"

"Out of the way? Why, she was the one who had really managed everything. That's what I told her. I got wind that the raid on Loo Fong's was coming, too late to do anything about it. But if I said that she and Chin Lee had been

acting without my knowledge, if I beat the authorities to it by telling them I'd just discovered what was going on, and would do everything in my power to help the prosecution, I could put myself on their side, you see. I told her I'd go straight to the district attorney or whoever was the proper person and tell him what I'd found out. Then, you see, if she tried to drag me into it, it would look like revenge."

"I see." Peter's expression was impenetrable as he dropped the words slowly, one by one. "You weren't even going to make a scramble for it. You were going to make sure that Luna went to prison, so that you would be safe."

"But if I didn't do that, they might have got me mixed up in it. I might even have had to go to prison myself! If we'd both made a bolt for it, and then they'd caught us, I wouldn't have had a chance in the world of keeping clear."

"I see," Peter said again. "And how did Luna take this —opportunity to insure your safety?"

A faint smile of satisfaction glimmered across Anthony's pallid face.

"She wouldn't believe that I really meant it, at first. She said I couldn't do it. She's always had me under her thumb. She thought she could make anybody yield to her. But for once I had the upper hand. I'd made up my mind it was the only thing to do. They wouldn't be nearly so hard on a woman, especially a woman like Luna, anyhow. I really think she owed me that much loyalty. Anyway, I stood up to her, and it wasn't easy to get the better of Luna. She didn't think I could do it. She thought she could bend everybody to her will. Well, she couldn't!"

"I think you'd have really enjoyed engineering Luna's downfall," Peter mused. "Too bad you missed it. But perhaps she persuaded you that the contest would be too dangerous—and you killed her in panic."

"How many times do I have to tell you I didn't kill her? Her death ruined everything. I didn't dare carry out my

plan then. They might get all kinds of ideas that I knew something more than I was telling. All I could do was to keep quiet and hope I'd be left alone. I counted on Chin Lee. That's what you get for trusting in a Chinese!"

"You let Chin Lee trust in you—and you failed him. But you counted on his loyalty—and as a matter of fact, for some crazy reason, he hasn't failed you, at least not yet."

"You mean—he hasn't talked?" An almost incredulous hope shone from Anthony's wan face.

"No, but you have," Peter reminded him tersely. "When Chin Lee finally brings himself to believe that you've really let him down on the bail, he'll not agree with you that the world owes you a safe and comfortable skin, whatever the cost. You might have bluffed it out, your word against his, but it's too late for that now. You've made your own admission, before two disinterested witnesses. If you'd sent him the bail, you could have afforded to bluff me too. You see what a disadvantage an uneasy conscience is."

"But I didn't dare put up the bail. I didn't dare make a single move that would drag me into it. Surely you can see that?"

"Oh, Lord, I see a lot of things—some of them none too pleasant to look at," Peter said with weary disgust. "I see that it's the most dangerous thing in the world to be a coward, and that it's possible to do things more despicable than selling dope and less admirable than committing murder."

"But, look here, if Chin Lee hasn't talked, it isn't too late!" Anthony leaned forward. "I suppose it was a mistake not to put up the bail, but there wasn't anybody to advise me. You see, I've never been used to having to decide things."

"The things you haven't been used to, if placed end to end, would make a complete list of admirable accomplishments," Peter murmured.

Anthony disregarded the interruption.

"But suppose I give you the money, and you put up the bail, without using my name. Then nobody need know. You said if I made it worth your while you'd help me straighten things out."

"What I said was that I'd listen to what you had to say, provided it was the truth," Peter corrected him meticulously. "It was you who took it for granted that if you offered a bribe the offer would be accepted. Well, when I go in for a life of crime, I'll pick something less smeary, like arson or bank robbery—and something that won't interfere with a story for the *Herald*."

"There must be some way out of it—there must!" Anthony whispered hoarsely. "Isn't there anything—anything in the world I can do? Do you mean—you'll let them arrest me?"

"Exactly so." Peter's voice was suave but his eyes were implacable. "And," he added cruelly, "I can assure you there'll be plenty of publicity."

"Oh, my God!" Anthony buried his head in his hands. His voice came muffled through clutching fingers. "What can I do? Will they get me for the murder? Surely they can't. What do you think they will do to me?"

"I hope they hang you." Peter recoiled with inward horror from the sound of his own voice. The words had come without volition. Something hot and primitive had swept through him like a flame—the brave man's instinctive hate of the coward. The wave of savage contempt receded, leaving him sick with shame at the malevolence that had seized and shaken him. "Lord!" he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know I had it in me to say a thing like that."

But Anthony was beyond coherent listening. He looked up, blinking as though he were trying to see his way through fog.

"Buck up and face the music," Peter said, not unkindly. "There isn't anything else to do. I'll have to go down to

the police station. I can't possibly explain all this over the telephone. Jackson, do you suppose you could——?"

"He won't get away from me." Jackson had stood in absolute silence and without shifting his position behind Peter's chair during the long conflict. He spoke now with calm conviction. "I can hear the least move he makes," he said. "And I'm not as strong as I once was, but I'm still stronger than most."

As Peter rose to go, Anthony pulled himself up from his chair. His hand fumbled in his pocket. Then he stepped forward, the knife extended on his open palm.

"You wanted this a while ago. Well, take it," he said.

Peter was still turning the knife over and over in his hand as he walked down the steps. He had played his trained wits against stupidity, his daring against cowardice, his strength against weakness, and the victory left him both depressed and perplexed. That last unexplained gesture puzzled him. Was Anthony, even yet, trying to curry favor by handing over the knife? Or was it the last capitulation, the bravado of despair?

"Any way you look at it, it's funny," Peter said aloud, his eyes fixed gloomily on the sun-drenched lawn at his feet. "Unless—unless he didn't know they've measured the wound. That's just the kind of ordinary sensible thing he wouldn't know. Or unless—he knows, and it's his way of admitting that he's sunk. They'd take the knife anyway, when they put him in jail—still, that's another thing he wouldn't know. But he'd rather I had it for some reason or other. It's not only funny—it's *damned* funny!"

With which adjuration, Peter stamped viciously on the starting button of Bossy and, still frowning, whirled the long-suffering car around in the direction of the police station.

CHAPTER XXX

Both Peter's perplexity and his depression were due to be augmented in the succeeding hours, but he had regained his customary cheerfulness as he slid into the inspector's bureau of the City Hall, carefully avoiding the press room in transit. When Peter appeared at police headquarters it was a signal for the beat men to give up swapping routine information and trail the *Herald,* and Peter had no desire to be trailed at the moment.

"Something?" The automatic inquiry lapsed as Peter's head peered around the aperture in the door, whither he had followed a circuitous route by way of the traffic bureau. "Oh, it's you, is it? What's up?"

"Where's Oleson?" Peter asked of the inspector at the nearest of the long row of desks that filled the room.

"Busy as a bird dog."

"Well, he's going to be busier than that." Peter strolled down the aisle and humped himself over Oleson's desk, disarranging a pile of typewritten reports with a sweep of his elbow. "I've got some dope for you," he said, assuring himself by a glance over his shoulder that his entrance had not led a procession from his observant rivals of the press room. "I'd save it till morning if I could, but it won't wait. It's understood, of course, that it's our ownest own? I'm giving it to you before I've even phoned the office."

"Shoot!" Oleson said laconically.

"It's about that Loo Fong raid——" Peter began, but Oleson interrupted him.

"The narcotic detail is handling that," he said sharply.

"I don't know anything about it. I've got my hands full on this cult murder. I thought you were on that, too—didn't suppose you'd bother with a dope haul," he added.

"Oh, I'm bothering, all right—so will you be," Peter assured him. He fished the knife from his pocket and laid it with a dramatic flourish on the desk. "You *will* tell me to run along and quit pestering you, will you? Well, that's most prob'ly the knife that stabbed Luna. I got it from her husband along with an admission that he's behind the Loo Fong dope smuggling—by the way, I found their selling headquarters, too—and he was having a bang-up fight with Luna the night she was killed. I couldn't get him to confess to the murder, though," he concluded apologetically.

Oleson's eyes were twinkling as he rose from the desk.

"That's just too bad," he said with friendly sarcasm. "Well, it's a good tip, Peter, and I'm much obliged. I'll do you a good turn myself if I get a chance. Only don't run away with the idea that it's all over but the shouting. Nothing's finished till it *is* finished. For instance, how do you know this bird won't blow before we get to him? And how do you know he'll stick to his statement? Even if he confesses, it's got to have corroboration, you know."

"I left him under guard," Peter answered the questions in turn. "And I've picked up several little bits of evidence here and there that connect him with the dope joint and with Luna's place. He knows he's going to be arrested, but I don't think he'll try to run. Don't you think it would be a good idea for me to go out with you? We could check his statement to you with what he told me."

The fan-shaped wrinkles at the corners of Oleson's eyes deepened as he surveyed Peter with a shrewd and comprehending smile.

"Meaning that you hope he may confess to the murder and you don't want to be missing anything like that," he interrupted.

"Well, it's my pet story at the moment," Peter admitted with a grin. "I'd like to be present at the climax, if there *is* a climax."

"Oh, come along, come along!' Oleson agreed as if yielding to an importunate small boy pleading for lollipops. "I'll just send this knife up to the identification bureau to check with the dimensions of the wound, and get a warrant for Anthony's arrest. Then I'll be right with you. We can hold him for investigation anyhow, and fix the charge when we've heard what he has to say."

Oleson, however, was destined never to hear what Anthony had to say. For when he had puffed his way up the long flight of steps, with Peter bounding nimbly ahead, they found Jackson, stolid and erect behind the chair from which he had apparently not moved since Peter's departure—and Jackson was guarding a dead man.

Anthony lay stretched full length on the hearth, a pistol clenched in his hand, and a neat bullet hole in his temple.

Peter's first emotion was one of overwhelming disappointment.

"My God!" he said, "that tears it! We'll never learn anything more from him now."

Oleson stooped over the body, and mechanically felt for the heartbeat. The examination was mere routine, for it was obvious at a glance that the man was dead. Still on his knees, he turned to Jackson.

"How did this happen?" he demanded sternly.

"I reckon he killed himself." Jackson's answer was courteously spoken, but he seemed to have withdrawn into some remote inner fastness of his being. "But I don't know nothing about it. I'm blind, you know."

"Do you mean to say you left a blind man in charge here?" Oleson also was disappointed, and his vexation found relief in irascibility.

Peter, however, disregarded the rebuke.

"Oleson's a friend of mine, Jackson. I'll take it as a personal favor if you won't be so damned inaccessible."

To his extreme surprise, Peter's voice broke. It was his own fault. He had killed Anthony as surely as if he had fired the bullet into his brain. The man's monstrous egoism, his abysmal inability to recognize his own vileness, had roused in Peter a savage impulse of cruelty. He had despised Anthony so utterly that he had struck at him with the weapon of fear, had literally frightened him to his death. Standing over Anthony's dead body, Peter reached out a supporting hand to the mantelpiece. He was not proud of himself at that moment.

"Don't you take it so hard, Mr. Peter." Jackson's voice was a gentle crooning, soft as the sound of a night wind among the leaves. "I reckon he wasn't much use to himself or anybody else, so I just let him put himself out of the way. There ain't no place in God's world for a creature like that, but what's the good of torturing him? I said I wouldn't let him go. Well, I did—I let him go." Forgetting the hard accent of his Northern home, the old man's voice slipped from word to word, caressing as water over hidden stones.

"You heard him get up. You knew he was reaching for a gun from over the mantel!" Peter did not pause to contemplate the uncanny prescience with which Jackson had read his mood from his few spoken words. With retrospective horror, he visualized the scene. "But he might have been getting the gun to kill you!"

"I heard him take the gun down," Jackson said simply. "I didn't know for sure what he wanted with it, but I hadn't the heart to stop him. The Lord did a bad job in the making of him, and his life didn't improve much on the Lord's handiwork. I had to give him his chance."

"You mean—you deliberately took the risk that he might be going to shoot you, in order to give him a free field for suicide if that was what he was up to?" Oleson stared at

Jackson with stark incredulity. The old man's mental processes obviously impressed him as bizarre to the point of lunacy. Peter remained staring down at the dead man. Life must have worn a hideous face for him—life without honor, without courage, without generosity. Peter had struck down the miserable creature with fierce contempt. But Jackson, out of pity for his infamy, had risked his own life to give the man a chance to die.

"You didn't have any business to let him get away with it," Oleson said with bitter reproof as Jackson nodded his head without speaking. "This case is hard enough as it is, without cluttering it up with dead men that we can't question."

"To hell with the case!" Peter's own disappointment was sore enough to seek vent in a sputter of profanity. "I thought I knew quite a lot about human nature, but I didn't know it had quite such dregs as the rotten thing Anthony called his soul. And I always thought I was average decent, but I found I've got some pretty black spots that I didn't know about. You lay off of Jackson, Oleson. I take off my hat to him."

"That doesn't help the course of justice any," Oleson grumbled. "And your friend Jackson hasn't shown much disposition to help it either, the times I've talked with him."

"You're damned right he's my friend!" Loyalty shone like a beacon from Peter's eyes.

"Well, we won't fight about it. We've got enough on our hands without that. A good clean-cut confession from Anthony would have helped a lot. That's out, now. I was working on another line when you came in—or I had been. But that's out, too, so far as getting any real proof is concerned. I might as well tell you—we've found Tanner."

"The deuce you have! Where is he? Do you mean to say Anthony was telling the truth when he said he didn't kill her, and Tanner's in it, after all?"

"I don't know whether he is or not, and I'm not very likely to find out, at least not directly. You see, Tanner's dead, too."

"But——" Peter paused, staring blankly at the unseeing heads that stared back at him from the wall. Anthony's suicide looked like a confession of guilt. Why else should he kill himself rather than submit to arrest? Peter's mind fumbled for words he had read somewhere—something about the murderer for whom there was no refuge from confession but suicide, and suicide itself was confession. But Tanner—had Tanner also killed himself? Was Anthony's death merely a final frantic expression of the cowardice that had ruled his life?

"What happened to him?" he asked dully.

"I was waiting for the conclusive identification when you came in," Oleson said. "But it looks like Tanner, all right. He was either trying to bum his way on a freight, or he threw himself in front of the train. Anyway, his body was found on the tracks. And a rifle—the same kind of rifle that killed Luna—was lying a yard away from the body. We might as well be getting back and see if anything's come in."

"Are you going to take me with you? Will you put me in jail for what I did, letting Mr. Anthony off when Mr. Peter told me to watch after him?" Jackson's voice was steady, but his massive shoulders were bowed as with a great weariness.

Oleson drew his notebook from his pocket and scratched busily on its pages with a stub of pencil before he answered.

"Here's your statement. I'll read it over to you and you can sign it—that'll be enough," he said gruffly. "Peter here's a wild and temperamental guy, but if he says you're all right, I guess you are."

Jackson rightly interpreted the curt speech as an overture of friendliness.

"I'm much obliged. I'd sure hate to go to jail. That's why I didn't say as much as I might, the first time you came out."

"I'll say you didn't!" The rasping sound in Oleson's throat might have been a chuckle. "But Peter seems to think you're the eighth wonder of the world, so we'll have to excuse it."

When they returned to the police station after telephoning for the ambulance to take Anthony's body to the morgue and driving Jackson to his lodge by the now permanently open gates, they found two reports awaiting them on Oleson's desk. The body found on the railroad tracks was indeed Tanner. And Anthony's knife had a blade which, in length and width, corresponded to the dimensions of the wound in Luna's body.

CHAPTER XXXI

PETER'S disheveled black head was sunk in his hands in an attitude of profound dejection. His face under the reading lamp looked preternaturally long; gloom and discouragement were in every line of his drooping shoulders. When the "black hump" settled down on the usually sanguine Peter, Barbara knew that there was nothing to do but wait, for when Peter's mental atmosphere was murky, he refused to admit the possibility of a single ray of light to mitigate his despondency.

Earl Vincent was to be arraigned the next morning, and there was not a doubt in the world that he would be held to answer on the charge of murder.

Ruth Morgan, who had been staring at a single advertisement for half an hour, flung her magazine aside and planted both elbows on the library table. Her small square face was thinner and sharper in outline, and the freckles stood out against the pallor of her skin, but her eyes challenged Peter across the table with all their old courage and determination.

"You're not sensible," she accused, breaking the dismal silence which had held the room since Barbara's departure for bed an hour before. "It's silly nonsense for you to say you've let us down. You've done a lot—more, I suppose, than anyone else could possibly have done. Do you suppose Earl and I don't realize that?"

"A fat lot of good it's been," Peter jibed from the depths of his self-disgust. "I've been chasing around in circles. It's all very well to get farther away from the beginning of things, but I can't see that we're one bit closer to the end. Everything I touch goes wrong."

"But the things you've found out—they really do mean something. They must!" Ruth protested.

"Oh, yes, they mean something, but that something is a long way from proof. What we need is a stronger case against somebody else than the case against Earl. And for that, we need a whole lot more than inventions and interpretations that might fit the facts. That's why it's such rotten luck that Anthony and Tanner are both dead. Either one of them might have turned up something more than we know, if we could just have kept after them. There'd have been the possibility of a confession, and I've about come to the conclusion that a confession is the only thing that will clear the mix-up. If the man who really killed Luna is dead, we're sunk, that's all! On purely circumstantial evidence, the thing can be read half-a-dozen different ways—and of all those ways, the easiest one points to Earl. I talked to Graham about it to-day, and he thinks he's got a strong enough case for conviction."

Ruth caught her breath sharply. Her teeth sank into her lower lip, as if to repress a cry of pain, but when she spoke her voice was steady.

"Do you mean to say," she asked slowly, "that they can disregard all the other possibilities?"

"We mustn't let Earl know how black things look, but you can stand to face the truth, and you deserve it," Peter said. "Then you'll know just what a worthless dub I am. I'll tell you exactly how much stock Graham takes in all this stuff I've dug around for. And he thought he was paying me a compliment!

" 'It makes mighty interesting reading,' he said, 'but after all, we've got a man in jail already for this murder, and he still looks the best bet of the lot. Anyway, a bird in the hand is worth a dozen newspaper scares in the bush—to everybody except the newspapers.'

"That's what he thinks of it. 'After all,' he said, 'every-

thing you've called to our attention, when you sift it down, may have a bearing and it may not. And the idea that it has is nothing but your own ingenious speculation in the interest of making a good story.' The worst of it is, he's about right. The weakest part of the whole business is that you can imagine half-a-dozen people being guilty. And that very fact shows how inconclusive the evidence is against any one of them. They can't all have done it, you know."

"No, but somebody did, and that somebody isn't Earl," Ruth flashed. "Do I understand that you've given up? You may be what you call a worthless dub, but I put my faith in you. I put Earl's life in your hands, that night in the hills. I didn't expect miracles, but I did somehow fail to realize that you'd be a quitter."

"Who in hell said I was quitting!"

Ruth's firm mouth relaxed in a brief smile of victory. Depression was the enemy of action, and even in the clear-sighted desperation which refused to turn away from facts in their uttermost blackness, Ruth was no defeatist. She did not know what could be done—she had spent nights of tearing at her pillow in a frenzy of revolt against the limitations imposed by her own ignorance. But the truth was there, it existed, and there must be some means of finding it. She could not accept Peter's recognition that, even if found, it would be useless unless it could be proved.

But if Peter confessed himself beaten, she was helpless. If his paralyzing mood of self-distrust could not be lifted by the cheering words of her gratitude and her faith, then she must sting him to anger. The next step was hidden from her eyes as from his, but he must go on. If he failed —but not even Ruth, with all her courageous acceptance of reality, could bring herself to contemplate the ultimate horror of that failure.

"I'm not quitting," Peter repeated, "but I'll admit I'm stumped. I don't know where to go from here."

"Then let's see exactly where you've gone already. If we lay everything out in a row, we can at least tell where we are. It won't seem quite so confused." With a sigh of relief, Ruth caught a responsive gleam of interest in Peter's eyes. Futile though the expedient might be, it provided at least the illusion of action, and the illusion might lead the way to some constructive suggestion. "We'll begin with Earl," she said bravely. "That's the hardest part for me to face, and we'd better get it over first."

Peter drew a folded pad of copy paper from his coat pocket and spread it on the table.

"I can't think without a pencil," he explained. "And it's a good idea to get everything down in black and white, where we can check it over. First of all, there are several things to be considered. There are the physical facts—the evidence at hand. That evidence ought to indicate two things —the probable motive of the crime, and the character of the person who would commit it in that manner rather than any other, leaving this precise tangible evidence behind him.

"The devil of it is, that it doesn't indicate anything of the sort—at least, not beyond doubt! The three most striking points about Luna herself are that she was addicted to numerous and hectic love affairs, and that she was a crook engaged in separating fools from their money, and that she was a reputed witch. That's another check on the motive, you see. You ought to be able to get at it from both ends and have them meet in the middle, like building a tunnel, because the motive for murder, unless it's a plain stick-up or something like that, must lie just as much in the character of the victim as in the criminal."

Ruth nodded her understanding of his point.

"But you see how it is," Peter went on. "Both the crime and Luna's personality make a plausible picture of at least three motives. It might be love or jealousy; it might be revenge from someone she'd fleeced in her confidence game

or a quarrel arising out of her dope traffic; or it might be superstition—someone who took her witchcraft seriously, and hated it with religious fanaticism, or someone who was afraid she would use her magic against him, or even perhaps someone who had expected her to make a spell for him and sought revenge on her because it didn't work."

"Yes," Ruth asserted, "I see how any one of those might fit. In fact, we already know of persons who might have had each one of those motives. But it may be someone we haven't found or thought of at all, and if there are three equally plausible motives, there may be more. I see what you mean about the victim and the crime not making lines that meet in a single direction and therefore excluding any other possibility. Perhaps even the motive lies in another direction altogether."

"That's it," Peter agreed dolefully. But the mere fact of mental activity had already restored something of his usual vigor. "Still, there's one check—we don't have to take on all of Luna's lovers and victims and followers. Whoever did it was there, of course, so we're limited to those who were or might have been present."

"Someone might have been present that we've had no trace of, as yet," Ruth suggested.

"True enough," Peter admitted. "But before we launch off into the absolute unknown either as to motive or person, we'd better exhaust the possibilities that we do know about. Now, we'll get down to business. First, as you say, there's Earl. The tangible evidence has to be accounted for on any theory. Some of it may be irrelevant and accidental, but it can't all be. There are the rifle, the letters, the left-handedness of both wounds, the bathrobe cord, and the whittled stick."

"I can put the case against him—I ought to be able to, I've thought about it enough," Ruth said with a wry smile. "He had a motive—infatuation and disappointment. He had

a rifle, and he's left-handed. We've only his word for it that he wasn't present. Nobody saw him, but, by his own admission, Jackson was asleep with the gates open for the better part of the night. Earl could have taken the bathrobe cord from the hook on the door. It's quite possible to suppose that a man distracted to the point of killing the woman he loved rather than consent to giving her up would leave his love letters as an explanation of his act, intending to kill himself too—and then, instead, would have taken to flight. I've read of plenty of cases where a man committed a murder in an overwrought state of emotion, and then lacked the nerve to follow it with suicide."

Ruth's tightly clasped hands on the table before her were her only betrayal of the strain it had been to outline thus starkly the menacing array of circumstances against the man she loved.

"By Jiminy, you've thought it out clearly," Peter said, gazing at the set young face with admiration in his eyes. "You've a good head—and nerve."

"I've got to have," Ruth agreed. "And the only point to set against all that is simply Earl's character. Someone else in Earl's position might have done it, but it's just not the kind of thing he'd ever do in the world. He'd never have bound her, and struck her when she was helpless. I know he tried to escape, and it's hard to put into words precisely what I mean, but if he hadn't killed her, he might run away because his imagination worked him into a state of panic. He'd run away from imaginary things, but not from real ones. If he'd really killed her, the truth would have shocked him awake, and once he's face to face with something that must be confronted, he's no coward."

"I do understand that," Peter said. "But if you were on the jury, and hadn't known Earl all your life, how would you vote? Remember, when a man's on trial he's the only one to be considered. Nobody else can be brought into it,

except in a roundabout way when a clever lawyer sneaks in what he can, over objections."

"I'd say it looked very much as if he were guilty," Ruth said staunchly, but her eyes closed for a moment, as if to hide the dark shadow of pain in their depths. "I might even think there wasn't a reasonable doubt. But I'd still think it wasn't absolutely proved."

"That's the Scotch verdict—'not proven.' And a mighty useful verdict it is, too. The question of character—whether an act that might be natural to one person would be virtually impossible to another—is immensely important, but it doesn't go over in court. The law asks us to judge acts apart from personality, to consider that individuality doesn't exist and human beings are as alike as toy soldiers. They aren't alike. Individuality is just about the most fundamental fact in this human world—and yet we're told to disregard it! So far as character goes, Frances Hodgson fills the bill. She's neurotic and emotionally unstable—abnormal to begin with, and a drug addict besides. I feel sorry for her, but I nevertheless think she was jealous enough to commit murder."

"I'm afraid that belongs to what Mr. Graham calls ingenious speculation," Ruth demurred with a gallant attempt to smile.

"Well, she's left-handed, at least temporarily, and she knew where the bathrobe cord was, and it would be exactly like her to place the letters on the breast of her idol, and fold the hands over them. Her presence isn't certain, but she would have had no difficulty in being there. You know, one of the things that worries me most is the fact that there were two wounds with different weapons and inflicted from different spots. It was so unnecessary—not as if she'd merely been stabbed twice. I can't for the life of me figure that in any other way than as psychopathic. The Hodgson girl dresses like a man and carries a pocket knife—there's nothing to connect her with the gun, though. The real

point against her is the atmosphere of the crime. That fits her to perfection, but you can't bring atmosphere into court."

Ruth shook her head.

"I do think what you call the atmosphere is as real as any other. That's partly what I mean about Earl—it's almost absurdly incongruous to think he would have done it. But atmosphere isn't enough. I'm afraid we'll have to give a verdict of 'not proven' again."

"There is some solid material evidence against Miller, anyway," Peter went on to consider the next name on the list. "He did hide his bathrobe, and that amounts to an attempt at the concealment of evidence."

"It doesn't prove that he had a guilty conscience," Ruth protested. "It only proves that he thought he might be suspected of having one. We've got to be fair, you know. I wouldn't want to try to make anyone the scapegoat—not even for Earl's sake."

"Well," Peter argued, "he was actually present, and we know it. He tried to get Jackson out of the way by giving him liquor. He says he didn't go inside the house, but he was close enough to hear the quarrel between Luna and Anthony, and there wasn't a thing in the world to prevent his going in after Anthony left. In fact, he admits that he did that very thing, though he sets the time later, after Luna's death—but he'd have to do that, for self-preservation. He thought Luna was playing him false, and was bitterly angry and jealous. And he has a violent temper."

"Violent—but not exactly subtle, from what you've told me," Ruth commented. "It would have taken a particularly cool kind of deviltry to lay out those letters in order to throw the blame on an innocent man."

"No, he wouldn't have done it for that. He'd have done it in a sort of moral bravado—a self-justification for his jealousy. And remember, there are three fingers missing from his right hand. Anyway, those three—Earl and

Hodgson and Miller—are the only ones we know who combine the necessary left-handedness and opportunity with a love motive."

" 'Not proven'—for all three," Ruth reiterated firmly.

"Then there's the second side of Luna—the side that sought for power and money by playing on the credulity and weakness of others. Tanner threatened her—there's no doubt at all of that—and he was present, or at least in the vicinity. He'd think that anyone who did him out of twenty thousand dollars would deserve to be executed—drawn and quartered, for that matter. It seems more likely that a man would bind her up and demand his money back, and then kill her when she refused, than that a man who loved her would bind her and kill her in cold blood.

"Still, there's always the possibility that she was stabbed first and bound afterwards, in a deliberate effort to confuse the picture. If Tanner dug up the letters in hunting for money, he must have left them in a conspicuous place for just that sort of blind. That's pure speculation, I'll admit, but it isn't speculation that he had a gun, and that he disappeared after threatening to get even with her—and that he's dead. His death has put him out of our reach for further questioning, but it doesn't prove he didn't do it. In fact, if he committed suicide, it's rather an indication that he did do it."

"But it doesn't prove it. He might have committed suicide because he realized he'd never get back his life's savings, or because he couldn't get anybody to cook him two-minute eggs—or his death may have been an accident."

"It might—and we've lost our best chance of finding out whether he had anything to do with the murder or not."

"If he did, there's bound to be a way of finding out." Ruth's mouth was set in a stubborn line.

"I'm sorry, but it doesn't follow. It was an awful optimist who said that murder will out, considering all the unsolved

crimes that are floating around. But we're not through yet. Anthony's suicide is the worst blow we've had, because if he did it he'd have been sure to break down. There's some tangible evidence against him all right, but though it proves his connection with the dope smuggling, it doesn't absolutely touch the murder. At that, if he were alive, the circumstantial evidence would be strong enough to make the police work on him. But he's dead, so they can't, and that's that."

"They'd let Earl hang, just because Anthony killed himself so they can't try him?" Indignation flashed from Ruth's eyes.

"Not quite. If there was anything conclusive to show that Anthony committed the murder, they'd release Earl like a shot. Don't get the idea that he's being 'framed' or 'railroaded' or anything like that. Neither Graham nor Oleson wants to convict an innocent man. They're as human as anybody, and it's all hooey that prosecutors and policemen want to bag somebody to make a showing, whether they have the right culprit or not. But they *have* got a case against Earl, and—being human—it's natural that they should concentrate on it."

"But Anthony's suicide—surely that is even more an indication of guilt than Earl's flight!"

"No, because Earl hadn't anything else but the murder charge to run away from, and Anthony faced prosecution on the narcotics charge. He was an abject coward and weakling and he couldn't face the music—all his life he'd expected somebody else to get him out of trouble, and when he was left alone he hadn't any fight in him."

"He was present—that much is absolutely proved, anyhow."

"Yes, we knew he was present, and if we didn't know also that he had a reason for going to Luna on the dope

business, that point would be very strong. But it's open to two interpretations—one of which tallies with actual known facts, and the other is really just guesswork. It's such reasonable guesswork that if he'd lived I'd have clamped that murder charge on him or perished in the attempt.

"He was utterly selfish, cruel, and unscrupulous. He would have had no chivalrous antipathy to binding a woman and then killing her in cold blood. He'd have been quite capable of deliberately planting the letters in order to throw suspicion on someone else and conceal the real motive of the murder. He hated Luna because she wounded his sense of inferiority which he was always trying to conceal even from himself. She was his master, both in brains and personality, and she didn't hesitate to let him know it. So much for character. But I can't help thinking that it was really more like him to threaten to expose her and send her to prison to save his own skin than to kill her—it was so much meaner revenge than a good clean murder, for one thing."

"But *that's* pure speculation, surely! And the knife isn't. It's a real piece of evidence connecting him with the murder."

"The knife fits the wound, but so would any other large-sized pocket knife. There's the same trouble there as with the rifle. It isn't a question of finding a weapon that might have done the work, but of being sure of the one that did, out of any number of possible weapons. We can absolutely identify the knife that left the microscopic marks of its edge on the whittled bits of wood, but that doesn't prove that it was the knife that stabbed Luna.

"Anthony knew firearms so well that it's almost certain he would have known the danger of identification of a high-grade gun and wouldn't have used one that could be traced. But that, you see, is purely negative. You can't argue that Anthony shot Luna because she was shot with the kind of rifle Anthony didn't ordinarily use. He was blind in one

eye, which proves that he could have done it—physically, that is. Incidentally, that widens the field of search enormously. I've been looking all the time for a left-handed murderer, but we've got to consider the possibility that he wasn't left-handed but only left-eyed. Any man with only one eye, who knew how to shoot, would be almost certain to think of the left-handed inference, and use his left hand for the stabbing—he'd have had it called to his attention so often, and a blow with a knife would not require any particular dexterity."

"Do you honestly think that he did it—and that it can never be proved?" Ruth faced the horror of that issue without flinching, but Peter winced before the throb of anguish in her voice.

"If I tell you what I honestly think, you'll probably believe I'm cock-eyed," Peter said. "Certainly Oleson would, and Graham. And maybe I am."

"Nobody's ever called me fanciful—in fact, I'm awfully literal-minded and practical. And I can be fair, even when it hurts. I'd like to know what you think, and if it's in the clouds—well, maybe we can bring it down to earth."

"It's just this," Peter said earnestly. "Of course, the physical evidence is all that can be taken into account—officially. And I've been doing my durnedest to work it out on that basis. But I can't get it out of my mind that what we called the 'atmosphere' a while ago is more important than any fact. I keep coming back to it—that the Luna who was murdered was Luna the Witch. I can't put my finger on it. When I imagine the gun and the knife and the letters and the cord ticketed as 'people's exhibits' in a courtroom, I know there's nothing weird, nothing even abnormal about them. But that isn't the way I saw them first. The brain that conceived and executed this crime did not see the world as we see it. There's something—something demoniac about it."

"You don't mean that it was literally supernatural—I'm sure you can't think that."

"No, but the supernatural was real to the mind that killed Luna. And that's why we haven't been able to intepret it but have been led astray in all sorts of directions. There's something we don't understand because we haven't the clue to that vision of the universe. We're thinking in terms of the rational world—a world that's charted, even where it's insane or criminal. But there's something about this that isn't rational—not even insanely rational."

"Is that just an impression—what they call an intuition—or is it an inference from what is actually there? I haven't much faith in intuitions, you know." Ruth gazed at Peter with serious, questioning eyes, her chin cupped in her hands.

"It's not based on anything that I could take to Oleson or Graham, if that's what you mean. It has a link up with the tangible evidence, and I haven't been able to find a single link. There's Charlie Russell, for instance. He had the opportunity to be present, for he lives in the cult colony. He has a withered right hand, and I believe, though I've not direct proof of it, that he has a gun. He might have killed Luna through fear of her powers of witchcraft. But there is absolutely nothing to link him directly with the crime. And if he did it, we'd have to suppose that the letters were placed as part of a kind of ritualism—giving her the letters to take with her in death, as the Indians had their most precious possessions buried with them. But there's no excuse on earth to have Russell arrested, and his mother would see to it that he wouldn't talk while she was with him. She'd protect him to the last inch. I can't force anything out of him—there's too little to go on."

"I can see that," Ruth acknowledged, "but you haven't told me yet just why you have so strong a feeling that it was somebody in the colony. It does seem as if the police would have considered that, the first thing."

"They did, and they're convinced there's nothing in it. If there had been any evidence, they'd have found it. They're thorough enough."

"They didn't find Miller's bathrobe," Ruth reminded him.

"That's an idea!" Peter almost leaped from his chair. "They searched the houses, but Miller hid the bathrobe in a hollow tree. It would be impossible to search a whole forest. Still, except for Miller and Russell, there's no one else whose personality or conduct looks suspicious—nobody else who's left-handed, or one-eyed, either. But there's another possibility, though I'll admit it's the most speculative of all."

"I know—you mean Luna's father."

"I mean the man who cursed her, and thereby, according to Jackson, induced the Lord to allow the devil a free hand to carry off Luna's soul. There's mighty little we know about him. We don't even know that he is her father—that's just another hunch, and it may be wrong. But we do know that, whoever he was, he was close by and might have been present. There's not a scrap of evidence against him—we don't know whether he was left-handed, or had a gun. But I'd certainly like to meet him. Suppose he took the fulfillment of the curse into his own hands and punished her with death for her blasphemy and revolt, leaving the letters on her breast as a sign of her sin. It's just what he ought to have done—I mean, there's a kind of æsthetic and logical rightness to it. But there's no tangible sign that he did. Those two—Russell and the old man hurling his curse at the sky—are the ones who fit the immaterial something, the 'atmosphere,' and they are the very ones I can't fasten on to the material objects. I can't join the two worlds."

"But you're not superstitious," Ruth insisted. "There must be a reason why you're so certain about that other world."

"It's not a reason, exactly. But I've covered a good many

crime stories, and there are two elements in this one that are completely alien to anything I've run into before. It's nothing that I can call evidence—it's too vague. I can't tell it to the police—I can't even tell it to the *Herald*. But those two things keep worrying me because I can't even hazard a guess at their significance. Why were there two wounds? I can see how there could be two, but I can't for the life of me see why. The other thing is the missing shoes. They've got to mean something and they mean absolutely nothing on the basis of the known facts."

"They're still missing?"

"Yes, they're still missing, but even if they'd been found, I'd be as much in the dark as ever as to why they were taken off in the first place. We've had to work back from the evidence—that's the only thing to do. And yet, I believe it's all wrong. I don't believe the evidence will ever uncover the—the underneathness of it. I'm beginning to think that I've gone at it wrong end to. I've tried to get at it from the outside, when perhaps the only way to reach the truth is from the inside. If there was time, I'd drop everything and study up on witchcraft till I could call the devil by his first name."

"No, there isn't time for that." Ruth's voice was low and urgent. "But you said you didn't know where to turn. If you're really going on with it, it strikes me there are just two things to do."

"Of course I'm going on!"

Ruth's small fist smote the table, sending Peter's pencil rolling to the floor.

"Then you've got to find that old man—Luna's father, or whoever it is. Of course he may not do us any good when you do find him."

Peter could not forbear smiling at the uncompromising assurance of that "when."

"One way to save Earl is to find out who is really guilty.

But we've got to face the possibility that the truth will never be discovered. Then there's only one other way to save him. You must find some means of proving his alibi." Her upraised hand checked Peter's expostulation. "Oh, I don't say it's easy—I'm not a fool. But it has to be done; and if a thing has to be done, there must be a way to do it."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE arraignment of Earl Vincent was a brief and formal affair.

Ruth, who had nerved herself to fight through the crowd that flocks to a sensational murder trial, was surprised to find the courtroom almost empty. The rows of vacant chairs gave it the aspect of a deserted schoolroom, save for the small knot of men gathered inside the railing—the court reporter at his table, Graham and several other attorneys chatting amicably with their backs to the main section of the courtroom, three or four reporters of the "courthouse beat" drifting in unconcernedly and lolling across the barrier.

Several defendants had already mumbled the formula of their pleas before Peter entered the courtroom. In fact, he would not have been there at all if he had not thought that Ruth might derive some comfort and support from his presence. To her this was no empty formula, dulled by repetition, but a vital crisis in the life of the man she loved. Peter passed her without speaking, for her connection with Vincent and with himself had thus far been kept from the knowledge of the other papers, but she turned to him with a grateful look which he answered with a brief encouraging smile.

One of the attorneys was arguing with the judge and Graham for a change in the date set for the trial of his client.

"If convenient to the district attorney, I'd like to have the case put over a week, your honor," he said. "I have an important business engagement for the week of the thirteenth."

The judge removed the spectacles from his nose, wiped them on a large white handkerchief, shook out the handkerchief with a flourish, and looked down from the bench with an ironic and comprehending smile.

"Hm, yes—I believe the open golf tournament is set for the week of the thirteenth," he observed. "It would be a miscarriage of justice if you didn't get the second leg on the championship cup, wouldn't it?" A snicker from one of the reporters brought a severely reproving glance from the bench. "Would—say, the twenty-second suit you, Mr. District Attorney?"

Graham's shining blond head nodded assent.

"Perfectly, your honor. I only hope the weakness of Mr. Tracy's case will not put him off his game."

The array of attorneys at the long table thinned as one by one they buckled the straps of their briefcases and withdrew when their cases had been set for trial. To Ruth, sitting with cold hands clasped in her lap, it seemed horrible that they should be so casual, should exchange friendly persiflage with the district attorney. He did not look like the ruthless prosecutor she had expected. These men, with whom he was about to engage in combat, with the freedom, the future, the very lives of fellow human beings at stake, seemed to be his friends.

"The case of the people against Earl Vincent."

Earl rose. He was thin and pale, but in the set of his shoulders was a new poise and assurance. The boyish impulsiveness of his face had subtly matured. He had endured the days in jail with a calm fortitude, betraying no anxiety even though he had been held incommunicado except for a visit from the public defender. His hands, resting lightly on the edge of the table, were still the hands of a dreamer, but his eyes, raised to the judge's bench, were the eyes of one who has learned to face life steadily and unafraid.

"Not guilty," he said in a clear and natural voice.

But Peter scarcely heard the words. He darted through the swinging gate in the railing and dropped into a seat beside Ruth.

"Why is nobody here?" she whispered. "I thought there'd be a crowd——"

"Oh, nobody cares about an arraignment," Peter said, too intent to soften this callous dismissal of a scene that to Ruth was fraught with harrowing significance. "When did Harrison come into this?" he demanded urgently. "You didn't tell me——"

"Harrison——?" Ruth stared blankly.

"Leo Harrison—the big man in the gray suit, who's talking now. He says he's been retained by Vincent. Do you mean to say you didn't know?"

"I don't know anything about it. They haven't let me see Earl. I never even heard of Harrison."

"Somebody must have got the money—and plenty of it—to hire him. Could it be Earl's father?"

"Mr. Vincent hasn't any money. And I know Earl hasn't. Of course I'd have given him anything I had—I told Mr. Vincent that. But there was nothing we could do but leave it to the public defender."

Peter stared at the floor, frowning in deep perplexity.

"Well, Harrison is a good man—and an expensive one. He wouldn't get interested in a case just for the publicity; he doesn't need to. You'd better cut along out of here, before the boys wonder who you are and why I'm talking to you. I'll make up some kind of yarn that'll hold them, if they try to buzz me about it. This was so sudden I had to get at it quick, or I'd have waited to see you later. But it's just as well I didn't—there's something darned funny about this, and I've got to find out what it is."

Ruth slipped out of the courtroom as the judge rose from his chair and the group inside the barrier dissolved.

"What brings you down among us pore common people?"

one of the reporters asked as Peter strolled nonchalantly forward, swinging the gate behind him. "Trying to find out how the other half lives? I thought arraignments were beneath your notice."

"Oh, my wife has a girl friend visiting her—that girl I was talking to a minute ago—and she was all thrilled to death to see the inside of a courtroom, so I had to oblige."

Peter wandered without apparent purpose to the counsel table, shook hands with Graham and chatted idly for a few minutes.

"Why, hello, Harrison," he said in a tone of surprise. "I haven't seen you for ages. Where have you been all my life?"

Harrison had already turned to go, but he paused to return Peter's greeting.

"How about a bit of lunch?" Peter suggested.

"Thanks, but——"

"Better not turn down a free meal." Peter had laid his hand lightly on Harrison's arm; his fingers tightened in a sudden pressure, then relaxed.

"Oh, all right, if you put it that way," Harrison smiled.

"Your lift," Peter announced as they stood on the courthouse steps. "I walked down from the office. And I'm sorry to disappoint, but you don't get fed yet. Drive me along up to your office where we can talk in peace and quietness."

"I thought you must have something on your mind," Harrison observed.

"Ulterior motive and all that. The keen legal intelligence was on the job, even if I did have to make a black and blue spot on your arm before you realized that I wasn't inviting you to lunch just for the sake of being seen in august company. But I want your undivided attention, so we'll let it wait till we're in your office."

"Well, what's all the deep, dark conspiracy?" Harrison asked, when Peter, his feet elevated to the seat of a tapestry-upholstered chair, was filling the air with the smoke of an

inferior brand of pipe tobacco, which mingled with the less obnoxious fragrance of Harrison's cigar.

"Of course, you know we don't try a case in the newspapers, or anything like that," Peter began.

"No, never," Harrison agreed with sarcastic emphasis.

"Still, I don't mind telling you privately," Peter continued unperturbed, "that I'm working like hell to get Vincent out of this jam."

"I've noticed your efforts. I thought you were dashing about in disinterested pursuit of a sensational story—art for art's sake, as it were. Still, you do seem to have given some energy to suggesting alternatives to Vincent's guilt. The other papers have all plumped against him from the start."

"They had to. They didn't have anything else. I have. I don't mind telling you that I know all that's known about this story—more than Graham knows, more than Vincent himself knows."

"With all due modesty," Harrison twinkled.

"With all due modesty," Peter echoed soberly. "You're Vincent's attorney, and I'm pro-Vincent in this yarn. I think I might be useful to you."

Harrison leaned back in his chair, his keen dark eyes fixed meditatively on Peter's earnest face.

"What you mean is," he said at last, "that, with all you know, I know something you don't, and you're aching to find out what it is. Am I right?"

"Quite." Peter dropped the word with a decisive click. "Do I get it?"

"Well, I don't know why not. It has me rather puzzled. What do you want to ask me?"

"I want to know how you come into this case. You weren't in it before. I'd like to think that my stories in the *Herald* worked on your sympathies to go out crusading for the under dog, but I don't flatter myself."

"You needn't. As to how I came into the case, that is what puzzles me. I talked with Vincent last night for the first time. He seemed surprised to have me barge in. At first he thought either you or a girl named Ruth Morgan must have sent me—he looks on you two as his guardian angels. That's why I'm willing to take you into my confidence, such as it is."

"No, it wasn't Ruth, and it wasn't I. I couldn't stick your fees, even if it was my own murder trial. That's what I want to know. Who was it?"

"It was a man named Amos Perkins. Do you know him?"

"Never heard of him. What is he like?"

"I don't know."

"How do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean exactly what I say. I don't know. Some time yesterday a thick envelope, addressed to me, was thrust into the mail slot of the door of the outer office. It was too bulky to slip through, and stuck there until the second mail delivery, when the postman called my secretary's attention to it because he couldn't put the mail in."

"It had been mailed?"

"No, delivered by hand. An ordinary cheap envelope. I didn't see it until I came in from court yesterday afternoon. In the envelope was a thousand dollars in rather small bills —that's what made it so bulky—and a note authorizing me to take over Earl Vincent's defense, signed Amos Perkins."

"Writing disguised?" Peter asked.

"Not likely. You'd love to have that bit of melodrama, wouldn't you?"

"No, I wouldn't," Peter contradicted. "I've got all the melodrama I can handle. I want simplicity for a change."

"Well, here's the note. You can see it for yourself."

Peter bent his near-sighted eyes close to the single sheet of cheap unruled paper on which a few lines were written in

a shaky hand, with a pen that had sputtered and left a shower of inky specks in its progress.

> Enclosed please find one thousand dollars ($1,000) with which to prove that Earl Vincent did not kill the woman known as Luna, and oblige
>
> Yours respectfully,
> Amos Perkins,
> *St. Regis Hotel.*
>
> P.S. The innocent must not suffer for the guilty,

he read.

"No, I don't think it's a disguised hand," Peter agreed. "He's an old man, but not illiterate. Rather punctilious, in fact. He hasn't mixed up 'respectfully' with 'respectively,' the way most uneducated persons do, and he's trying to be businesslike—notice that repetition of the amount of money in parenthesis. But the postscript isn't so impersonal. The poor old soul doesn't own a fountain pen, or he'd never have struggled with that rusty thing, and ink that has been exposed to the air till it's nearly solid. It's rather queer anyone with such marks of poverty about him should have a thousand dollars in cash to throw around. He was evidently doing the thing as neatly and properly as he could —he even used some kind of marker to keep the lines straight."

"Unless he was deliberately faking the poverty as a concealment," Harrison offered. "The name may be false, you know."

"In that case he'd hardly have left his address," Peter objected. "Have you looked up the St. Regis?"

"I haven't had time to look up anything. With Vincent's arraignment set for this morning, I had to spend the evening talking with him."

"And what do you think of him?" Peter laid the letter down on the desk and transferred his attention to the new subject.

"I went over the case with him for several hours. I told him that it was my business to defend him, not to pass judgment on him, and that anything he told me was privileged and in confidence. If he was guilty, I could manage his defense much better by knowing that essential fact. A man who lies to his lawyer is the worst kind of fool."

"And what did he say to that?"

"He isn't a fool—far from it. He saw my point perfectly, and he has no illusions about the gravity of his situation. It's my business to recognize a liar—goodness knows, I see enough of them—but I'm inclined to believe that if he were guilty he'd have said so. Well, he didn't."

Peter rose to his feet.

"Then we can play together," he said. "I don't want Vincent to be got off just by having a lawyer clever enough to weaken the case of the prosecution to the point of 'reasonable doubt.' A man's life can be ruined by that kind of acquittal almost as much as by conviction. I want you to believe in him and pull like hell to clear him altogether."

"No wonder he thinks you're his guardian angel." Harrison smiled indulgently at Peter's heat. "And all for a man who means nothing to you. What a romantic soul you are!"

"Like hell I am!" Peter glared at Harrison as if he had been insulted. "It will merely make a better story, that's all." Nothing infuriated him so much as to be accused of the generous human impulses which he always hotly denied. For Peter, who could be led to any extreme of quixotism by his quick and sensitive sympathies, took the utmost pride in claiming to be "hard-boiled" and cynical. "Then you do believe in Vincent's innocence?" he insisted.

"I have had very little time to study the case, but at the

present time I am inclined to," Harrison answered cautiously.

"If that isn't just like a lawyer—couldn't answer plain Yes or No to save your life." Peter rejoiced in the opportunity for revenge. "Well, if you don't start with a closed mind that Vincent is guilty, you'll be more and more convinced of his innocence, the further you go. I told you I thought I might help you. Well, I have a notion that the old bird who wrote this letter may be a man whose name I don't know, but whom I've been very anxious to find. I'm going to the St. Regis after him right now, and I'd be glad to have you come along."

Harrison glanced at his watch.

"We'd better lunch first, hadn't we?" he suggested.

Peter shook his head firmly.

"Sorry—lunch is indefinitely postponed. I've had people committing suicide on me all over the lot. I'm not going to risk Amos bumping himself off while we sit still and eat. If he's who I think he is, he may be important. Good grief," he groaned, "don't you high-powered legal lights ever think of anything but your meals?"

"Evidently I'm not to be allowed to think of mine—except wistfully, as hope deferred," Harrison sighed. "However, I don't suppose I can let you grab this witness, or whatever he is, before I get to him. You newspaper men are an unscrupulous gang—you'd think nothing of tampering with evidence if it helped you to get an exclusive story."

"Right you are," Peter agreed with great cheerfulness. "Come along. And I tell you right now, if you went to bed last night and let old Amos die or disappear, so help me, I'll have you disbarred!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE St. Regis Hotel did not live up to the aristocratic connotation of its name. Harrison, descending from his unostentatious but expensive coupé on the mean side street swarming with sharp-featured and dirty children, glanced with distaste at the frame building whose entrance door was adorned with the sign: "Rooms, 35 cents a night." The structure, in an advanced state of disrepair, leaned crazily against its neighbors, as if, lacking their external support, it would have tumbled to the ground.

"Quite a slumming party, eh?" Peter remarked. "This is what is known as a flop house. One of them burned a few months ago. The type of men who come here insist on drinking 'canned heat' and then set fire to the bed clothes with the fag ends of cigarettes. You can't expect all the elegance of safety and fire escapes at thirty-five cents a night. They didn't have a chance, poor devils. Jimmy put the story on an inside page—no class to it. But I don't suppose they enjoyed being burned up any more than if they'd rated page one and a grand-jury investigation into fire hazards. Very bolshevikish of me to mention it," he shrugged with hypocritical cynicism. "Excuse it, please."

"I can't quite see why a man with a thousand dollars in his pocket would put up in a place like this," Harrison said dubiously. "Maybe it was a fake address."

"Maybe—but the pen and ink were very St. Regis-y. However, we'll soon find out."

Peter led the way up narrow, uncarpeted wooden stairs

to an open room where seedy and bleary-eyed old men sat idly, scanning the want-ad pages of the newspapers, grimy from their passage from hand to hand, or bending over packs of greasy cards at the worn, bare tables. Here and there a youth of the hobo type, physically or mentally incapable of coping with the stress of competitive existence, lolled with vacant eyes and slack mouth, already accepting as his natural place this abode of the hopeless.

Harrison dropped back, embarrassed and irrationally ashamed of his well-cut suit, acutely conscious of the impassable gulf which separated him even from a mental understanding of these passive derelicts. But Peter advanced into the room as if it were his accustomed habitat.

"Anybody here know a guy named Amos Perkins?" he asked with easy friendliness.

"Sure," a harsh voice answered. "He'll be in his room—202. Hardly ever leaves it, except when he comes out here to try to break up our card game and tell us we're all children of Satan. Cracked, he is. Else he'd know there was no need of a devil as long as we've got the kind of human beings there are in the world." The voice broke in a hoarse cackle. "I guess we're all cracked, when it comes to that. If we weren't, we'd go out and smash the whole lousy machine to bits and grab our rights."

"Oh, dry up or hire a hall," a bored and weary voice protested from behind a tattered copy of *Wild West Romances.*

"He's right at that——"

But Peter had already drifted from the room, leaving its inmates to their loud and empty argument.

"If they'd known he had that thousand, his life wouldn't have been worth a plugged nickel—and his taking off wouldn't have been worth two inches of type," Peter muttered as he peered at the half-obliterated numbers on the doors lining a maze of dark and narrow corridors. "Here we are. Thank God he's still alive," he whispered as footsteps

sounded on the floor within in response to his knock. "I'd begun to think there was no luck left in the world."

The door opened, revealing the stooping figure of an old man, so thin that his frame seemed to be held together only by the rigidity of his spirit. He was clothed in an old-fashioned frock coat, worn to the verge of raggedness, and his thin white hair and long wisp of straggling beard had failed to veil with the softness of age the hard straight line of his mouth and the uncompromising harshness of his features. His eyes, sunk deep within bony sockets under the jutting parchment-skinned brow, were faded to the nondescript blue of skimmed milk, but they retained a gleam that defied the physical weakness of age. Peter at once decided that he looked like one of the more unpleasant of the minor prophets.

"Mr. Perkins? My name is Harrison," the lawyer began.

The old man's hand dropped from the door knob.

"Come in," he said in a voice surprisingly firm and strong.

The room into which Peter and Harrison stepped was scarcely larger than an ordinary bathroom. A strip of mangy carpet covered a portion of the splintered floor. It was furnished with a sagging bed, an old-fashioned washstand from which the cheap varnish had scaled in patches, covered with newspaper, and a single unpainted chair with a split bottom. Perkins motioned them to a seat on the bed. Unlike most men who have sunk to the level of a flop house, he did not, even by look or gesture, apologize for his surroundings, and he seemed utterly indifferent to the contrast between his personal appearance and that of his visitors.

"You have come to tell me that it isn't enough?" he said. "That you will not do the Lord's work and save Vincent? I was afraid—but it is all I have. I have not laid up treasure in this world." The words were spoken with resonant pride; their tone implied that he had turned his back on riches by deliberate and unregretted choice, preferring the course,

whatever it might have been, that had led him to this dingy cubicle.

"No, I am quite willing to take the case—in fact, pursuant to your instructions, I have already done so. But I should like to know a little more about it. You are a friend or relative of Mr. Vincent?"

"I have never met the gentleman."

"Of Luna, then?" Peter interposed.

"I know no one by that name."

Peter was quick to sense the change of tone and of phraseology. Like most persons who consider it a mortal sin to lie, Amos Perkins had become adept at playing tricks with the English language in order to bring about the same effect without an offense to conscience.

"The woman who was killed was not your daughter?" Peter insisted.

"My daughter was baptized in the Lord by the name of Martha—her name was Martha Perkins."

"Good Lord!" Peter breathed. "That gorgeous creature, with her lust to conquer the world, was named Martha Perkins. No wonder she revolted! But after all, you're a good deal alike. Neither one of you would yield an inch of what you were after. Even your voices are alike."

Perkins's hand reached out for support to the washstand beside him. He sank weakly into the chair, but even as he tottered he seemed curiously detached from that evidence of physical weakness, as if it had no connection with the spirit that upheld him.

"Yes," he said, "my daughter turned from the Lord. She committed the unpardonable sin, and the wages of sin is death. 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.' She gave her soul to Satan, not blindly and in ignorance, but wilfully. Her death was a judgment on her sin. 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.' She was my child, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. It was a hard chastisement the Lord

laid upon me, but 'if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.'" The mighty voice rolled on like the surge of breakers against a cliff. Harrison's dry and legal tones seemed curiously flat and unreal in contrast to those tremendous utterances.

"Do I understand," he said, "that you are trying to say this woman was your daughter, and that you yourself killed her?"

"I carried out the judgment of God upon her. The Lord and I struck the blow. I followed her. The foxes in their holes lived better than I, but I found her. 'It is quite true that I have sold my soul to the devil,' she said, 'and Satan will protect his own.' She challenged the power of the Lord God Almighty with the power of Satan. And the Lord struck her down in the pride of her iniquity."

Even in the reeling horror, relief, and triumph of that moment some fraction of Peter's mind stood aloof and smiled at Harrison's utter bewilderment. He was an extremely able lawyer, but he evidently felt himself unfitted to cope with even the most unpleasant and minor of the prophets.

"If you feel that way about it," Peter said gently, "why didn't you go and tell the police in the first place? By the way, I don't know whether it's legal to warn you that whatever you say can be used against you, but if this is a confession, Mr. Harrison is a witness to it, and you will most certainly be required to repeat it to the proper authorities."

"I thought I might be spared that final test of my faith. But your coming is a sign that it is not God's will that I should be spared. I am ready to go with you at any time."

"This puts me in a most peculiar position," Harrison said with a puzzled frown. "In a way, you are my client. At least you furnished the funds to retain me and I came here in response to your note. Now it appears that your—your information," he paused as if uncertain what term to apply to Perkins's sonorous outpourings, "can be used to

help clear Vincent at the expense of yourself. Perhaps, if I may suggest it, the best thing would be for you to transfer the retainer in your own behalf and permit me to act as your counsel."

"I need no defense for following the Lord's will," Perkins said with majestic simplicity. "The Lord is my shield and my buckler and the rock of my defense."

Harrison felt some hesitancy in saying that a good criminal lawyer would be more useful in the superior court than the whole choir of the heavenly host, but his face plainly showed that this was his judgment.

"This is getting complicated," Peter said. "It needs some thinking over. You couldn't bear the idea of letting someone else take the responsibility for your act—is that it?"

The old man nodded gravely.

"Well, I can't see the use of rushing to the police and having you clapped in jail on the spur of the moment. They wouldn't let Vincent out just on your say-so, without further investigation, anyhow. I'd like to let it rest for a bit, provided you'll stay where we can get hold of you."

"I have nowhere else to go," Perkins said quietly.

"You wouldn't—you won't——?" Peter faltered.

The watery old eyes met his with a swift gleam of understanding.

"My life is in the Lord's hands. It is not mine to take," he said with calm conviction.

And with that assurance they left him.

"I said nothing would clear up this case but a confession, and now that I've got one, I'll be hanged if I know what to do with it," Peter lamented as they drove back to Harrison's office. "If he gave that line of talk to Oleson or Graham, they'd think he was crazy and order an insanity hearing on him. Then, if he really is telling the truth, he'd be a discredited witness from the start. And yet every word that he said has all the overwhelming logic and power of a

great tradition behind it. A few centuries ago it would have sounded as reasonable as a pretty woman pleading temporary insanity for taking a pot shot at her lover does to-day. You can't deny there was a certain grandeur in it."

"I'm not concerned with old Amos as a case in the psychology of religion," Harrison said drily. "What I want to know is whether all those impressive quotations were wrapped around real facts. Most persons think that a confession is the strongest possible proof of guilt. Unsupported, it is the weakest. There are a dozen or more reasons for making a false confession, and most of them have come up in court. I could call Perkins to the witness stand and use him to befuddle the jury, but if it ever got out that he was paying for Vincent's defense it would give it a mighty queer look. And I couldn't very well use his own money to put him in a place where he'd most likely be arrested and tried for the crime himself."

"That does make it rather difficult," Peter admitted. "But, law aside, what do you think of him?"

"I think he's crazy," Harrison said succinctly. "I think he's read about the case until it's preyed on his mind. Maybe Luna was his daughter, but apart from that one fact, I don't believe he had a thing to do with it."

"No?" Peter's eyebrow cocked quizzically upward. "Well, when you've spent as much time among queer-minded people as I have lately, you'll look a little farther than that. I happen to know that old Perkins was around Luna's place that night, calling down the wrath of God on her."

"You think he'd murder his own child just because she'd left his religion?" Harrison was horrified.

"They take their God and their devil and their spells seriously—it's no pale shadow or convention or habit or philosophical theory with them, no matter which side they're on," Peter said gravely. "We've got to remember that they're living precisely as the whole Western world lived in the

Middle Ages. Spiritually, they're a throw-back. Sometimes it's a throw-back to a rugged outline of goodness that we've smoothed away and tamed. That blind man, Jackson, towers like a mountain. He's kept firm hold of something we've lost forever. As for Perkins, he must have had a rather rough time of it, preaching his gospel like something out of Habakkuk—I'm vague on Habakkuk, but you know what I mean—and wandering around lost in the Twentieth Century.

"I do think he'd have killed Luna like a shot, and been sure of the Lord's blessing on the work. I rather wish he did, because in that case we could surely get some kind of substantiation if he gave us details, and we worked hard enough on it."

"But you're not a bit sure of it," Harrison challenged. "You think yourself that he made up that confession—though why he did it, unless he's crazy, is more than I can see at the moment."

"No, I don't think he made it up. I think he believes it's true—and without being crazy."

"That doesn't make very good sense."

"That's because we're both hopeless moderns," Peter explained. "He cursed her, you see, and a few hours later she mysteriously died. Of course he thinks he was responsible! That's what he meant when he said that he and the Lord struck the blow. He thinks he started it by calling the Lord's attention, as it were, to the goings-on of Luna, and that retribution followed. At least that's what he might have meant. I'll hold in reserve the notion that he may actually have done it himself. It's a notion that will certainly bear looking into."

CHAPTER XXXIV

PETER reluctantly decided to keep Amos Perkins out of the story for the time being. Whether his confession was literal fact or not, the discovery of Luna's father, his hatred of the cult, and his acceptance of responsibility for her death was an "exclusive" to make Jimmy's eyes sparkle. It was dangerous to hold over the breaking of a story—there was always the chance that it might leak. In all probability Jimmy would not consent to suppression of the news, and it is one of the sternest commandments in the newspaper code that a reporter has no right to withhold information from his editor.

But in this case Peter had good reason to believe that he could keep the discovery of Perkins away from his rivals, and there was Harrison to be considered—Harrison and Vincent. The lawyer might make up his mind to hold Perkins as a surprise witness for the defense at the trial. Harrison had given Peter his confidence, on the express understanding that he would do nothing to injure Vincent, and without that confidence Peter would never have found Perkins at all. If the old man were to be kept under cover, the whole plan, of course, would be spoiled by a premature revelation. Old Amos did have a gift for involving people in moral quandaries!

With a sigh of martyrdom for his sacrificed "lead," Peter was pounding out a rather routine account of "latest developments" for the next day, in order that the public might not be deprived of its expected ration of what had come to be known as the "witch cult murder," when the telephone on his desk rang its summons in his ear.

The moment he heard the tense, strained quality in Ruth's

voice, he sensed that something both unexpected and important had happened. It was the first time he had ever heard Ruth give way to uncontrollable excitement.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, with a tremulous, breathless eagerness that communicated itself even over the wire, "but can you meet me at the district attorney's office right away?"

The request in itself, apart from Ruth's manner, was sufficiently startling. What possible business could she have with the district attorney, whom she naturally regarded as Earl's arch enemy—business, moreover, of which Peter had not the slightest anticipatory inkling?

"Of course I'll come, but what's up? Shall I call for you? Where are you now?"

"No, don't come for me. I'll meet you there. But hurry." And with that unsatisfactory message, Peter heard the receiver click back upon the hook.

He paused only long enough to rattle off a hasty concluding sentence to the story on his machine, and flung the copy on Jimmy's desk as he passed.

"Better hold this up till you hear from me. Something's likely to break," he said over his shoulder.

"Here, wait a minute. What have you got?" Jimmy called out.

"I don't know, but I'm on my way to find out." And Jimmy's further inquiries were drowned in the piercing wail of Peter's whistle as he loped, hatless, from the room, banging the door behind him.

Ruth had not yet arrived when he reached Graham's office, hurried past the secretary with a friendly nod, and thrust his head, unannounced, through the door. Graham glanced up with surprised annoyance which deepened to astonishment as he recognized his visitor.

"Have you got a sixth sense, or have you merely tapped my telephone wire?" he asked. "I have an appointment."

"I know. It's my appointment, too," Peter grinned. "I'm just the advance guard of the party."

"You *would* be," Graham observed. "Well, come in and sit down. But if they don't want you, you'll have to wait outside."

"Thanks for the tribute, and the cordial welcome." Peter settled his long frame comfortably in the depths of a leather chair. "You said 'they.' Who else is coming? I know about Ruth Morgan. She's the one that called me."

"Wright is on his way. Who's this Miss Morgan you seem to be so chummy with?"

"The state parole officer?" Peter disregarded the latter portion of Graham's remark. "Now what has he got to do with it?"

"I haven't your impatience. I'm quite willing to wait to find out. I told Miss Bloodgood nothing about letting *you* in, however."

"Oh, she didn't have a chance to stop me," Peter said, unabashed, as the secretary with a premonitory knock ushered in Ruth followed by two men.

Peter, whose business it was to know everyone in official circles, nodded to Wright, and Graham rose with extended hand.

"I see you already know Mr. Wright," Ruth said with a quaintly social air, as if the district attorney's office were a drawing room and the company had gathered for tea. "Mr. Graham, this is Mr. Basker."

The face of the extremely handsome, slender youth behind Wright lit with an engaging smile.

"I think Mr. Graham and I have met before," he said. "In fact, if I recollect aright, Mr. Graham prosecuted me with such success that I went to the Big House."

"I also recommended you for parole, Basker," Graham reminded him. "I hope I wasn't mistaken."

"I know—and I thank you." The dark, handsome head

bowed. "I hope you won't think I'm repaying you with a bad turn now. But I don't think you will. You're pretty square. You wouldn't want to get the wrong man, just for the sake of a conviction."

"I certainly wouldn't." Graham's tone was emphatic. "But so far I don't know what you're talking about."

"Miss Morgan's really the responsible party. I move she takes the floor." Basker's brightly manicured fingers waved in Ruth's direction.

Ruth turned her direct gaze to the face of the district attorney.

"Earl said he was with Mr. Basker on the night that Luna was killed," she said. "But he couldn't very well come forward and tell that Earl was with him, because——"

"He was breaking his parole by being in the city at all," Wright finished the sentence for her.

"But I knew from Earl that he was finishing his autobiography. And then I saw an advertisement announcing the publication of the book, *Racketing through Life*. I didn't tell you about it, Peter, because it seemed such an off chance that anything would come of it." She turned apologetically where Peter lolled at ease in the armchair.

"But I wrote to the publishers. I thought it just possible that Earl's visit was mentioned in the book. I wrote them all about what it meant to Earl—to me. And they forwarded the letter to Mr. Basker. He gave them permission to send me the galley proofs, and there they are."

She drew two or three long slips of folded paper from her bag and laid them on the district attorney's desk.

"The name has been changed, but everything else is just as it happened, dates and all. He couldn't have made it up to save Earl. In the first place, why should he? And in the second place, the manuscript was finished that very night and mailed to the publishers the next day—they have the record of it."

"You knew that Earl Vincent was with you on the evening of the murder, and left for the South at your instigation, and you did not tell us?" Graham's face was stern.

"I'm not hired to do your job—as a matter of fact, I was too busy to think anything about it. I didn't put Vincent into my book to give him an alibi. It was just a bit to show one of the reasons why boys turn to robbing banks. He interested me as a type, so I put him in. Even if I had told you, would you have believed me—an ex-con, breaking his parole?"

"Maybe I would have wanted some verification," Graham admitted with a smile. "Still, you've come here now to uphold his alibi. Why is that?"

"Ask the young lady—it's her story."

"It was the only way I knew," Ruth said, flushing under the battery of eyes turned upon her. "I couldn't very well expect Mr. Basker to go back to prison for breaking his parole, in order to help Earl. That wouldn't be fair. So I went to see Mr. Wright. Mr. Basker wasn't doing anything wrong in coming to the city; he just wanted to work on his book. I explained it all to Mr. Wright, and got his permission to put an ad in the paper that he wouldn't have Mr. Basker punished for the parole violation if he'd help us. It was your paper, Peter."

"My God, don't rub it in," Peter protested. "You put that into the classified ads, and I never even saw it!"

"It wasn't the immunity that persuaded me," Basker said, "though I'm glad enough to have it. I've a good offer for a series of syndicated articles, and I didn't want to lose that chance. But it was really Miss Morgan's letter to the publishers. You couldn't turn down a girl who wrote a letter like that!" His eyes kindled at the recollection of the moment when he decided to risk his own freedom by responding to the appeal in that letter.

"He didn't have to know he was safe—he'd have done it

anyhow. Oh, don't you see how fine that is—how much he deserves to have his chance to write instead of being sent back?" Ruth pleaded.

"That isn't the point," Basker said deprecatingly. "The point is, will the district attorney take the word of an ex-con on any terms?" His mouth twisted wryly as he turned to face Graham.

Graham tapped the point of his pencil idly on the desk blotter.

"I'm glad you're getting your thrill out of literature, Basker," he said. "You were always clever—too clever to stick to the shoddy thrill of crime. It's because you're clever that I accept your statement. If you were trying to manufacture an alibi for Vincent, you wouldn't have gone about it in such a roundabout way. By the time your book was published, he might have gone to the chair."

"I didn't get wise to the importance of that last chapter in the book," Basker explained. "I had nothing to do with the job of killing Luna—and I never bother to read the crime news in the papers unless it affects me personally."

"No, I suppose it's the respectable citizens who read our most precious crime stories," Peter said meekly. "But say, Bert, you're going to accept this alibi. Is that right?"

"I shall move to dismiss the case against Vincent," Graham said gravely.

Ruth caught her breath in a sudden, audible sob.

"Lend me your telephone, quick." Peter leaped halfway across the room to the district attorney's desk. "You've got to stand for a picture, Basker. We don't want to use your police mug. We'll have you shaking hands with the district attorney and Wright. This is the time to bring Ruth into it, too. Girl saves lover. . . . Hey, Operator, get me Lakeside 1327. . . . Marian, find Jimmy and step on it. . . . Jimmy, can that stuff I gave you before I went out. Send me a camera man to the D.A.'s office as quick as he can get here.

They're letting Vincent loose—and there's a pretty girl in it!"

Peter continued to sit on the corner of Graham's desk, swinging his feet, as he flung the telephone back to its place.

"I shall move to dismiss the case against Vincent," Graham continued as if he had not been interrupted, "because his story has been substantiated from another source. I have received evidence that he was not trying to escape under an alias when he boarded the *Admiral Grayson.*"

"You didn't tell me that, Bert." Peter's voice was aggrieved.

"You haven't given me time, my energetic Peter," Graham answered. "The telegram came only this morning. I didn't have time to check on it before the arraignment. Of course, it's open to any paper that asks for it—but you happen to be on the scene and are the only one who's put in a bid yet."

Peter seized the yellow slip from Graham's hand. Bending over the desk, he rapidly copied the message, dated from Buffalo, New York.

JUST READ SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT STORY RE VINCENT CAPTURE [it read]. MAN CORRESPONDING VINCENT DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFIED BY NEWSPAPER PHOTO BOUGHT UNUSED TICKET ADMIRAL GRAYSON FROM ME STOP AFFIDAVIT FOLLOWS BY AIR MAIL STOP INCONVENIENT RETURN TO COAST TO TESTIFY BUT WILL DO SO IF NECESSARY PLEASE ADVISE STOP ADDRESS GENERAL MANAGER MAMMOTH HOIST & CRANE COMPANY.

W. L. SMITH.

"Smith is the general manager of the Hoist & Crane company all right, and was called back from Los Angeles just as he was about to sail on the *Grayson,*" Graham said as Peter handed back the message. "We had Buffalo check on him, of course. There's no doubt in the world that he

sold his ticket to Vincent, just as Vincent said. Basker's manuscript gives the time when Vincent left his place, just in time to catch the owl ferry.

"What Vincent has never thought to mention is that he stopped for gas and oil just outside of town, and it was so late at night that the gas-station attendant remembered the date and hour—he was afraid at first it was a hold-up. He brought us that information some time ago, but it didn't mean anything so long as Vincent had had plenty of time to commit the murder earlier. Now it appears that he didn't. His time is accounted for until he drove south, and the story he told of his reason for going is corroborated, as well as the circumstances of his boarding the *Grayson* under an assumed name. With those facts established, no jury in the world would convict him."

Peter swung his feet to the floor.

"Well, here's where I change sides, Bert," he said. "I don't blame you for holding out the gas-station attendant. You're a square shooter and you're as glad to see an innocent man cleared as to convict a guilty one. Hitherto I've been plugging away for the defense. Now I'm with you. We're not through yet. We've still got to find the man who really did kill Luna."

Graham passed his hand across the shining waves of his blond hair.

"I'm not blessed with your single-track mind, Peter," he observed. "I wasn't under any illusion about being through."

A knock at the door forestalled Peter's retort.

"That'll be Andrews for the pictures," he said. "Come on and powder your nose, Ruth."

He turned as he spoke and to his amazement saw Ruth, the indomitable, curled up in a small round ball in her chair with the tears streaming down her face.

"What—whatever is the matter?" He leaned over the chair with an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"It's because—because what you said is true," Ruth gasped, mopping her eyes.

"What did I say that's true?" Peter stammered, with greater astonishment than his reputation for veracity should have warranted.

"That about—'girl saves lover.' Oh, Peter, when Earl is free he can ask me to marry him. I'd have been glad to, anyhow, but he'd never have asked me, never in the world. And now—now—I think he's going to!"

"Well, for God's sake quit thinking about it, if it makes you feel that way." Peter's voice was brusque, but the hand that patted Ruth's shoulder was very gentle. "I'm no end glad and all that, but if you let your nose get one shade redder it'll spoil the picture. Buck up, woman—you're going to be page one 'art' in the *Herald!*"

CHAPTER XXXV

"All right, Willie, give it to Piper," Jimmy barked. "Twenty-seven on nine!" he added to the girl at the switchboard.

Peter picked up the receiver to hear the slow, indolent voice of Willie Hames.

"I've got a tip for you. You'd better stir your stumps and come over. I do just love to figure out work for other people."

The police reporter of the *Herald* was as slow of movement as Peter was active, as blasé as Peter was incorrigibly enthusiastic. But he had a reputation for elevating his plump legs on a desk in the press room of the City Hall, apparently somnolent, his semi-recumbent position varied only by an occasional drifting stroll through the corridors—and of absorbing "inside tips" through the pores of his skin. Those sleepy eyes in the round placid face missed very little.

"What's doing?" Peter asked eagerly.

"Well, some guy who looked as if he might belong to your precious voodoo colony came to see Oleson this morning, and they pow-wowed for an hour or so. They've gone out together now in Oleson's car."

"An old man?" It occurred to Peter that Perkins might have gone to the police independently with his confession.

"No, youngish. A putty-colored chap. I never saw him before. Oleson wouldn't stop to tell me what he was after. Since Vincent blew up on them, I think he wasn't anxious to publish any more mistakes. But it's my hunch he's gone out after another Luna suspect. You can probably get it out of

him when he comes back. From the way they dashed off, it looks fairly hot. I thought you might want to come over and stick around."

It was several hours before Peter's "sticking" was rewarded. Oleson returned, uncommunicative except for the bare fact that Charlie Russell had been arrested and booked for investigation. The pleading of the denizens of the press room for interviews was sternly denied. Willie Hames lazily stretched his legs, yawned, and sauntered indecisively from the room, indicating with a barely perceptible droop of the eyelid that Peter was to follow.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to return to the life of toil," Peter remarked a few minutes later, nodding farewell to the group of men absorbed in a game of "penny ante." "Much as I like your company, I can't hang around here indefinitely if Oleson won't let him talk."

He found Willie loitering aimlessly in the corridor, lighting a cigarette.

"Camberwell of the identification bureau has just gone into Oleson's office with some wet prints in his hand." Willie's face drooped over his hands, cupped about a match, and he spoke with scarcely a movement of the lips. "He looked fairly pleased. You might go up and watch for him when he comes out. If he's got anything, Oleson may be in the mood to talk." Grinding the match under his heel, he turned from Peter and made his way back to the press room, ennui in every line of his chubby countenance.

Peter reached the door of Oleson's office just as the inspector opened it for the emerging Camberwell. To Peter's surprise, the policeman beckoned him into the room.

"You're the very man I wanted to see," he said.

"Thanks," Peter grinned, "it's mutual."

"I didn't want to give out anything till I got Camberwell's report," Oleson remarked, settling himself in the chair behind his desk and waving Peter to a seat. "It looks as if

we've got the goods on Russell. That'll have to go to all of the boys, of course, but there are one or two things I wanted to talk to you about."

"You have? Good work! I've had my eye on him, but I couldn't figure out any way to clinch it."

"I know—you suggested that we have a talk with him, but he was mum as a clam, and his mother stood pat on his alibi, so it looked like a washout. However, the situation's changed. In my experience, just about nine tenths of the crimes are solved, not by clever Sherlock Holmes work, but by somebody coming in with information. We got the tip this morning, and went out there. We found the gun under Russell's mattress, and an empty shell in his sweater pocket. The gun, as you know, can't be identified absolutely, but the shell can." He touched the photographs spread out before him. "That shell tallies with the bullet taken from Luna's body, beyond the possibility of mistake."

"And the alibi?" Peter queried.

"The old lady was lying. She broke down when we showed her we meant business. She tried her best to hold out, but it's perfectly plain that she didn't know where Charlie was that night. It was finding the gun that finished her. She went pretty much to pieces then—had hysterics, and of course said we were framing her boy and that the gun was planted."

"It's rather odd about the gun, isn't it?" Peter had risen from his chair to examine the photographs and perched himself in his favorite position on the corner of Oleson's desk. "How come you didn't find it the first time, when you searched all the houses?"

"We didn't find it, because it wasn't there then. We never would have found it if Russell hadn't had some rum idea that, because the gun belonged to him, he'd die as it rotted away. He'd buried it, you see. Then he got worried and dug it up again. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. You've been out there studying up on these folks.

Could he really have had a crazy notion like that, or is he saying so in order to start building up an insanity defense?"

"Oh, no." Peter shook his head emphatically. "That's sympathetic magic. It's old as the hills, and perfectly reasonable if you happen to believe in it. It's one of the main tenets of witchcraft. Undoubtedly Luna used it on her followers. It's one of those lost beliefs that used to be wellnigh universal. If you'd been born sooner, you'd have taken it for granted the way you do gravitation—and thought it a darn sight more reasonable."

"Not me," Oleson asserted. "I take gravitation for granted because everybody knows it's so."

"Precisely," Peter said with an ironic quirk of his eyebrows. "There was a time when everybody knew that magic was so. We've developed a different set of mental habits now, that's all—at least most of us have. But anyway, Charlie Russell isn't smart enough to try to fake insanity."

"He's smart enough to keep his mouth shut, anyway. I thought he'd break down at once, but he hasn't. We'll have to work on him."

"He didn't tell you about the gun himself, then?"

"No, he let it slip to Carey. He's been following Carey around like a pet dog for some time."

"It was Carey who gave you the tip, then?"

"Yes. Carey had taken it for granted that Vincent was guilty, so he didn't begin to put two and two together until after the story came out about Vincent's alibi and that he would be released. Then he got to thinking things over. Charlie believed that Luna was a witch, all right. He thought she was in league with the devil and that she turned herself into an animal at night."

"Lycanthropy," Peter murmured.

"What?"

"The old werewolf tradition. Heaps of well-authenticated

instances in the Middle Ages. It's one of the best known witch accomplishments. The only way to kill a witch and destroy her power, except by burning, is to catch her in her animal state and kill the animal. It wasn't mere cruelty that made them burn the witches—that was necessary in order to make sure of finishing them."

Oleson realized that his jaw had sagged during Peter's recital. He closed his mouth with a snap.

"Oh, I've been reading up," Peter said modestly. "I'd come to the conclusion that the only way to understand Luna's murder was to understand witchcraft."

"Well, it looks as if you were right," Oleson acknowledged. Then he added with sincere admiration, "You're an awful high-brow, Peter, but sometimes you do deliver the goods."

Peter ignored the compliment.

"Did Carey by any chance see Charlie prowling around Luna's place that night?" he asked.

"No, he didn't. But when Russell's mother broke down, Charlie had to admit that he was out. At first he tried to string us along that Carey was with him. He's not so dumb but that he knew he needed an alibi and needed it bad. But when we brought Carey in and faced him with Carey's denial, he took it back and confessed that he was lying. After that he shut up, and we couldn't get another word out of him."

Peter drummed his heels against the leg of the desk for a moment without speaking.

"Did Carey tell you what is his own attitude toward witchcraft?" he said after a long pause. "I remember seeing him, and he looked just the type to go after the founts of hidden wisdom."

"He calls himself a student of occult phenomena," Oleson quoted with a wry face. "He joined the colony to investi-

gate Luna. As near as I can make out, he thinks her stuff was genuine, but that she wasn't—that she was faking the real thing."

"Yes," Peter nodded, "I can understand that point of view."

"Anyway, he didn't believe in that—that lycanthropy business. He had tried to talk Russell out of his threats against Luna—'threats' isn't exactly the word, it isn't vague enough. Charlie's mother had sold him on the idea that the reason why he wasn't like other boys was because he'd been bewitched in the cradle, but while Mrs. Russell had a kind of last-resort faith in Luna to cure him, Charlie seems to have got the idea fixed that witchcraft was wicked and dangerous. He hated Luna and distrusted her. Carey had tried to talk him around, and thought he had succeeded—until Russell's telling him that he'd hidden the gun roused his suspicions."

"Russell's attachment to Carey seems to have been genuine, anyhow," Peter mused. "It must be rather a hard thing to give your friend up for murder—especially one with Charlie's mental handicap. I don't wonder he hesitated."

"Oh, he hated to do it, all right. He looked fairly sick about it. But you can't very well leave a murderer of Russell's type at large, just because he's a bit weak in the head. In fact, they are the worst sort, so far as danger to society goes. But Carey believes that the most that can be done to Charlie is to send him to an institution. That's what he kept telling Mrs. Russell. 'If the boy did it,' he said, 'they can't be hard on him. They'll know he isn't right, and they'll just put him away for safe keeping.' "

Peter fixed his eyes steadily on Oleson's face.

"That," he asseverated, "is sheer nonsense, and you know it. Russell is subnormal, but he's nowhere near low enough to be legally irresponsible. If he's convicted, he'll hang."

"Sure he will," Oleson agreed. "Only it's lucky for us that Carey doesn't know it. If he thought he was betraying his friend to the noose he might have kept his mouth shut, and then we'd never have got Russell at all."

"He had to do it, of course," Peter said slowly. "It was the only thing to do—not only for justice but for the safety of others. I suppose I'd have had to do it myself, in his place. And yet, I don't envy him. There are times when doing the right thing must give one a nasty sort of Judas feeling."

CHAPTER XXXVI

On a Sunday afternoon three days later, a group of newspaper men sat in the sheriff's office connected with the county jail. They had made themselves very much at home in the room which, except for themselves, was deserted. Fragments of the sandwiches that one of their number had been delegated to purchase for lunch were strewn about, and the smoke of many cigarettes hovered in the air. The assembled newspaper men had been waiting, with what patience they could muster, since the middle of the morning, when word had been sent forth that Charlie Russell, after three days of questioning, was "breaking" and that a confession might be expected some time during the day.

Peter sat in a corner, his chair tilted against the wall, his eyes close to the pages of a book from which he occasionally glanced up when the blackjack game in progress on the desk reached a particularly noisy climax. Suddenly, with a grunt of amazement, he banged the chair forward and sat staring into space, letting the book slip from his hand to the floor.

"It's all right for you to lose your balance and break your neck," Evarts of the *Times* protested, "but why make so much noise about it? I was just trying for a nap."

But Peter only stared at him with unseeing eyes and stooped to recover his volume.

"What's the absorbing literature?" Evarts asked idly. "*Witches Still Live,*" he read, looking over Peter's arm. "What's the idea? Are you thinking of starting a nut colony of your own?"

"Just boning up." Peter had recovered his poise and tossed the book indifferently to the top of a filing cabinet behind him. "I may do a Sunday supplement feature on it when it's all over."

His interest was evidently exhausted, for he leaned back in his chair, once again precariously balanced on two legs, and let his gaze drift through half-closed lids to the opposite side of the room, where Andrews was expounding the merits of a new focusing device to a fellow camera man.

"You sight it here, and turn this thingamajig," he was saying. "Not that way, you boob—the other eye."

"I always have to sight with my left eye," his companion said. "I can see through the other one all right, but I can't squint with it. There's something wrong with the muscle. Didn't you ever know anybody that way before? It's fairly common."

For the second time within five minutes Peter received an inner shock which jarred his mind like an explosion of flashlight powder. This time, however, he managed to maintain his equilibrium, and merely glanced sidewise around the room. His own concentration on the camera man's words was so intense that it seemed incredible the remark should fail to attract general attention. The blackjack game, however, continued without interruption. Evarts, his soft felt hat drawn over his eyes, lay stretched on a flat-topped desk and had evidently resumed his nap.

The cards were thrown down on the table and the room was brought to attention by the entrance of the jailer.

"All right, boys, come along," he said. "Oleson's got a confession out of him at last. He's bringing him down now. We'll take him into the other room."

Bumping into each other and overturning their chairs in exit, the men stampeded from the room, their long vigil over. Only Peter paused long enough to retrieve his book from the filing cabinet and tuck it under his arm.

"We'll all shoot on the same flash, eh? I'll count."

"Pictures first, statement afterwards. Is that O.K. with everybody?"

In less than a minute the lolling group of loafers had become an organized band, alert and ready for coherent action. The camera men formed a closely set row, the reporters behind them and out of the way of the lenses.

They had just arranged themselves when Russell entered with Oleson. With dull and inexpressive eyes the man who had confessed to the murder of Luna gazed indifferently at the men crowded against the wall and sank into a chair.

"Move up closer, Inspector. Look this way."

"Hey, Russell, tilt your head a little more. That's it!"

"Give him a sheet of paper and a pencil, as if he's just signing the confession."

"One more—a close-up."

"Wait till the smoke clears. Open a window, somebody."

"All set?"

Bang!

The reporters pushed their way past the tripods and gathered about the table where Russell continued to sit stolidly, unmindful of the commotion about him.

"All right, boys." Oleson looked tired and worn, but triumphant. "Now, Charlie," he said kindly, as if Russell were a child whose accomplishments he desired to exhibit with parental pride, "these are all the boys from the press. I want you to repeat to them what you told me upstairs. The statement you made was free and voluntary, wasn't it—no threats and no promises of immunity?"

"Yes, sir—that is, no sir." Russell twirled his cap in his hands.

"You knew that your statement was being taken down by a shorthand reporter, and that whatever you said could be used against you at your trial?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Go ahead. Just tell them what you did that night—the night that Luna was killed."

"I don't mind telling, because I know they can't hang me. Carey said they couldn't, seeing that everybody knows I ain't right in the head."

Oleson glanced up sharply.

"Look here, boys. Nobody in authority made any such suggestion, and don't you forget it."

"But Carey said——"

"That's enough about Carey. You just go ahead and tell what happened."

"I went out that night with my gun to kill her," Russell said in a sing-song voice. "She was a witch, and wicked. She met the devil at night. I heard her talking to the devil, but I waited till he was gone. I was afraid of the devil, so I went away and came back later. I meant to get her when she had turned into a black dog, but when I got there the second time, I didn't wait. I rushed in and threatened her with the gun, while I reached back of the door for the cord. Then I bound her so she couldn't get away and took the knife out of my pocket and stabbed her. It was an ordinary large-sized pocket knife that I carried with me. I lost it afterwards and don't know where it is now." He was obviously repeating the words of his signed statement, brought out in response to questioning.

"I don't know why I put the letters there. I found them in the chest by the window. I looked in the chest, thinking maybe she had some of her devil's spells hidden there. Then I went out and fired through the window, thinking maybe I hadn't killed her the first time. I picked up the shell without thinking, and dropped it into my sweater pocket. I never thought about the shell again till the police found it last Friday when they arrested me. I buried the gun first, then I dug it up and hid it under the mattress where they found it.

I was alone when I did it, and nobody saw me. I killed her because she was wicked, and a witch."

The pencils of the reporters raced furiously across the copy paper balanced on their knees. They stood in strange, contorted postures, like weird birds, some with one foot lifted to the rung of a chair to give a purchase for the paper, others bending over the table.

"Carey knew——" The voice stopped as if some unseen hand had turned off the current of utterance.

"What did Carey know?" someone asked sharply. "Did he know all along that you killed her?"

Russell's narrow, opaque black eyes stared for a moment, then dropped.

"He knew—that I thought she was wicked, and a witch," he said in his inert, colorless voice.

"Well, I guess that's about all, boys. Charlie's pretty tired." Oleson had pounded out questions remorselessly, ceaselessly for three days. Now that he had won, he had the air of a protecting nurse looking after his charge. "Any questions?"

"Just one." Peter stepped forward until he leaned over the table directly facing Russell. "Look at me, Charlie." Russell obediently raised his head. "Why did you take off the shoes?"

"Shoes?" The blankness of astonishment succeeded the blankness of weary indifference on Russell's features. "I didn't take off any shoes. Why should I?"

"All right. That's all."

"Who knows how to work the switchboard? Plug in all the outside lines, somebody. We'll spread out into the different offices to phone in."

Peter disregarded the babble of voices around him. As the reporters scattered to the various rooms to telephone their stories, he slipped unobtrusively through the doorway and followed Oleson to his car.

"Drive me around the corner, out of sight of the windows. I want to talk to you," he commanded.

"I've had quite a day," Oleson demurred. "What's on your mind?"

"Simply that I don't like it," Peter informed him. "This is the second confession of Luna's murder that I've heard, and I'm not satisfied with either of them."

"The second?" Oleson thrust his car into gear at Peter's words, and swung it to the curb under the blank barred windows of the jail. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, the other one was phoney—at least I'm pretty sure it was," Peter said. "Two confessions, and I believe they're both wrong."

"What's the matter with this one? It's a perfectly clear statement." Oleson looked as insulted as if the confession were fiction of his own composition, and had been subjected to adverse criticism.

"Well, for one thing, it's detailed in some points and general in others. He's all set with an explanation about losing the knife, but he doesn't know why he laid out the letters on Luna's breast. Whoever did that did it for a reason —it may be a queer reason, but a reason, all the same. Then —how did he know that the bathrobe cord was hung behind the door? He's one of the few persons mixed up in this who had no reason to know that. I believe that whole statement was the effect of suggestion—not from you," he hastily added, as Oleson drew back, his square face flushing with anger.

"Nobody confesses to a murder just for fun," Oleson maintained stoutly.

"Not for fun—for fear," Peter corrected.

"For fear? Well, what fear can there be worse than the fear of the noose? That would be a reason for him *not* to confess!"

"There is a worse fear than the fear of the noose for

Russell," Peter insisted. "Hasn't it occurred to you that there is an awful lot of 'Carey said' in all this?"

"He did try to drag Carey into it at first, but he admitted he was lying when Carey confronted him. I think you've let this prey on your mind, Peter. We haven't a thing in the world against Carey."

"No, there's nothing against Carey, but I'm not satisfied. When Carey faced him, the fear of Carey was a living, imminent, concrete thing—far more potent than the remote fear of the outcome of a trial which he hasn't the wit nor the experience to grasp. Suppose Carey threatened him with one of those spells if he didn't admit he did it? A spell is a far more real thing to him than the verdict of a jury that's only a vague abstraction in his mind. Suppose Carey told him that if he confessed to the murder he couldn't be hanged —in fact, we know he did tell him that—but that if he didn't confess, Carey would slay him with black magic. He'd believe it. He held out as long as he could, till he was forced backward step by step, till he had either to confess or tell what he really knew. Suppose——"

"Yes, 'suppose'!" Oleson exploded. "There isn't a single solitary fact to make any reasonable human being suppose that Russell's confession isn't genuine. There isn't a shred of evidence to support this suggestion theory you've plucked out of thin air."

"But there is," Peter said softly. "There is just a single solitary fact. Russell didn't remove Luna's shoes. He hasn't an idea in the world why they're gone. And, you see, I've found out what the shoes mean."

CHAPTER XXXVII

"I DON'T see what you want to drag me 'way out there for," Andrews objected. "I've got a lot of copies to make, and I'm booked for a date with Society at ten o'clock."

"Somebody else'll have to take your date—there'll be no society shots for you this day," Peter said with cheerful firmness. "And you're not going out to take pictures—you're part of the picture yourself. Come along and quit grousing—and bring that newfangled focus thingumbub along."

"Well, I still don't see what there is to get wrought up about now," Andrews sputtered. "It's all cleaned up, so far as I can see."

" 'Yours not to reason why,' " Peter quoted tantalizingly. "You ought to count yourself lucky to be in on the drama. You're not much of an actor, but I'll have to put up with you because you've got the trick camera."

"Yes, and that same camera weighs twenty pounds," Andrews mourned. "I suppose you'll have me dragging it for miles."

"Very likely," Peter assured him. "And for God's sake, try to play up. I know you're not very bright, but do endeavor to pretend you are. When I tell you what to do, do it and don't look goggle-eyed as if you thought I'd taken leave of my senses."

"I think that already," Andrews retorted. But his quip failed of its mark, for Peter, pressing the button of the elevator, had pursed his lips, emitting the melancholy wail of the whistle that was his rallying cry.

Jackson came to the door of his lodge at the sound of Bossy's wheels grinding to a stop.

"I know that was the sound of your car, Mr. Peter," he said.

"Is everybody still here?" Peter spoke with suppressed urgency.

"Everybody but poor Charlie. They tell me he's bright enough to be held responsible in the eyes of man, but it was God that afflicted him in the first place. I think God will have to take His own work into account in judging him. Luna's murder was the devil's work and no mistake, but I can't somehow feel too hard toward Charlie."

"Well, the devil's stock is very low this morning." Excitement, as always, caused Peter to bubble with irrepressible gaiety. "Can you show me the nearest way to slip down to the creek without being seen? And wish me luck."

Jackson extended a gnarled forefinger.

"Down that way. There's no path there, but it's easy going. And I'll do something better than wishing you luck, Mr. Peter. If you care for the prayers of an old black man, I'll pray for you. I don't know just what it is you've come for, but I can hear it's something you care a lot about."

Peter's face was earnest and unsmiling as he extended his hand and grasped the twisted fingers of the negro with a steady pressure.

"Thank you," he said gravely. "I'll be glad to know you're praying for me. That you think I'm worth it is the highest honor I've ever had, or am likely to have."

Peter led the way in silence to the narrow gully of the creek bed. Andrews scrambled after him, muttering profanity as he caught his trailing tripod against outthrust branches. As they reached the bottom, Peter turned.

"That old man's put an awful lot of faith in me, and we can't let him down," he said with rare solemnity. "He's ignorant and superstitious and he's not above getting drunk. But the sheer goodness of him towers up like a rock. There

aren't very many people I take off my hat to, but I take it off to him. Come along, my hearty. We'll have to get our feet wet," he added with a sudden change of tone, as if ashamed of his display of emotion.

"If you'd just tell me what we're going in wading for——" Andrews pleaded.

"Indeed I will. We're hunting for a pair of shoes—black satin sandals, to be exact. They'll probably be near the middle of the creek in order to keep them under water. But the water's gone down some, so watch the edges too."

"What in hell——?"

"Oh, I'm not being mysterious. Those shoes are going to lead us to the person who killed Luna."

"But he's already in jail!"

"Oh, no, he isn't," Peter contradicted. "Charlie Russell didn't know anything about the shoes, therefore he didn't commit the murder."

Andrews paused, one foot poised on a rounded boulder that served as a stepping stone above the shallow water.

"Well, if that's what you call sense, I hope I'm spared listening to what you'd label nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"It makes sense, all right, if you get hold of the right premises," Peter averred. "That's what's been the trouble all along—we haven't taken it up from the right end. All our grand modern scientific methods were no good on this case. The fingerprint was a smudge, the footprints were nothing but daubs, and the rifle was too worn to leave any identifying marks on the bullet. The external clues failed. But there were other clues—things that gave a character and a meaning to the crime. We were dealing with the murder of a witch, and I finally reached the point of seeing that the only way to solve it was by witchcraft."

Andrews' face was a study in bewilderment. He had bandied insults with Peter in the spirit of a friendly, teasing schoolboy, but the underlying affection he felt for the

mercurial reporter was revealed in his troubled countenance as he turned, disregarding the water that swished about his legs halfway to the knee. His eyes were misty as he faced Peter in midstream.

"You've been working too hard on this," he said. "No story's worth wrecking your health for. Let's go back now. What you need is two weeks in the country. I'll explain to Jimmy that you're all worn out and need a rest."

"Oh, my gosh!" Peter's tone was one of abysmal disgust. "You'll be asking me next if I've heard voices or had pains in the head. Well, I haven't. I'm not goofy, I've just been getting an education. If you'll take your feet out of the water and remember to keep your eyes open for those shoes, I'll try to beat it through your thick head what I mean." Peter made a pass at Andrews' hair which almost precipitated the camera into the creek. "You're a good scout, Andy, at that. You really hated to think of old Pete ending his days in the bug house. But it's not very flattering that you accepted the idea so readily."

"Well, what in hell *do* you mean? You haven't made it very clear so far." Andrews' betrayal of sentiment had given place to an acute sense of exasperation.

"I mean that the only way to understand the murder is to take this witchcraft hocus-pocus as seriously as the murderer did. Otherwise the whole thing is out of focus. The motive, the method, the indications that were left behind as a sort of residue—none of them belonged in our ordinary modern world. So the only thing to do was to learn something about the world they do belong to. The shoes struck me from the very beginning as the queerest note in the lot. There were various possible ways of explaining everything else, but the shoes were unique. They were downright inexplicable. So I plowed my way through all the books on superstition and magic I could lay my hands on to find the key to those shoes. Talk about sleuthing! The real sleuth-

ing in this case was done in the public library. I found the answer Sunday, while we were hanging around waiting for Russell's confession."

"What was it?" Andrews was still only half convinced of the import of Peter's literary researches.

"I found it in a book called *Witches Still Live*—it was a modern case, too. The shoes of a murder victim had been removed and were finally found on the shore buried between high and low tide. They had nothing to do with the crime. It was the policeman who was first on the scene who had carefully deposited the shoes 'under running water' in accordance with an old charm, because otherwise the victim of violent death would rise up and do some haunting. And that, mind you, was in 1926!"*

"And you think somebody put Luna's shoes in the creek for the same reason? I begin to see the light."

"Not only that, but the person who did it was the murderer. It couldn't have been the policeman in this case. In the first place, Willie Hames and I were at the scene as soon as Oleson, and the shoes were already gone then. In the second place, it doesn't fit his temperament. If Oleson has any superstitions, they'd be only the obvious ones—thirteen at the table or picking up a pin for luck, things like that. He'd never go in for the more recondite forms of magic."

"But even if you find the shoes, I don't see that you're any nearer to finding out who put them there," Andrews objected.

"At least I know one or two people who didn't," Peter answered. "It rules out Miller and Anthony and Tanner. Their connection with Luna has no relation to the witchcraft angle. It also rules out Amos Perkins—he'd believe in a Biblical curse, but not in a pagan spell. And it rules out

*The case to which Peter refers is summarized from the New York *Times*, of May 21, 1926, in *Witches Still Live*, by Theda Kenyon, pp. 192–3.

Russell because, while Russell might lie, he certainly isn't a bright enough actor to fake such perfect blankness as he showed when I caught him off guard."

"But if all those are checked off the list, who is left?" Andrews asked.

"I don't know yet, but I hope to find out. Those shoes have to be kept under moving water, or Luna's spook will be rising to confront her murderer. The water in this creek has been diminishing for the last two weeks. Whoever put the shoes there is going to keep a close watch on them, for fear they'll be left high and dry. I imagine he comes down this way pretty regularly. Of course other people may come too—the man I'm after will have to fit the other known facts. But I've an independent check on that—that is, if the hunch I've got is correct. That's why I made you drag the camera along. Here, look out or you'll get your camera wet!"

Peter reached out a sustaining arm as Andrews suddenly slipped sidewise, almost losing his footing as he lurched forward, splashing through the shallow water.

"Hold these!" Andrews cried, thrusting the camera and tripod into Peter's hands. "Here they are. I've got 'em!" He held up two black and dripping objects. "They were still under water, all right."

"Well, they won't be any longer. Give them here." Peter held out his hand for the sodden black satin sandals. "Take your camera."

He wiped the shoes as dry as possible against the sleeve of his coat and laid them in a conspicuous position on the top of a boulder above the water line.

"Now we're all set," he said, surveying the newly placed shoes with gratification. "The wading's over and we can just stroll along and view the scenery. We don't want to make too much noise about it—'Quiet but casual' is our

motto. You'll have to hang on to the camera, in order to be ready, but I'll lug the tripod."

For a quarter of a mile they trudged on in silence. Then, around a turn in the curving creek bed, they heard the sound of advancing footsteps through the brush. Peter beckoned to the camera man and sat up the tripod on a level bit of ground, motioning Andrews, with a warning for silence, to place the camera on the stand. Then he strolled forward, and Andrews heard his voice raised in greeting just beyond the turn.

"Good-morning!" he said cordially. "We've met before, you remember. Nice to see you again. I want you to meet my friend Andrews."

In another moment Peter reappeared, arm in arm with a thin, sallow young man, whose pale eyes looked vaguely startled. The reporter's attitude seemed natural, if somewhat over-familiar—but Andrews happened to know that Peter was chary of gestures of intimacy, and seldom took even his best friends by the arm.

"We've been working hard on this case, and now that it's over, we've been given a day off," Peter chattered on. "Andrews is crazy about taking landscape photographs in his leisure hours—like the postman's holiday, you know. He simply loves to drag his camera around."

Andrews repressed a snort of derision at this description of his enthusiasm for scenery and for carrying his heavy camera on unnecessary jaunts.

"Andrews, this is Mr. Carey. Take a good look at him. He's the white-haired boy just now. He'll most likely get the $5,000 reward for leading the police to Luna's murderer."

Carey's shoulders twitched in a brief shudder.

"I don't want any money," he said. "My interests lie more in spiritual than in material things."

"Well, a corpse is a fairly material thing, for a fact. Are you interested in photography, by any chance?"

"Not very."

"Well, you won't escape having to pretend you are. Andrews is trying out a new focusing device, and he's as crazy over it as a child with a pair of new shoes. He's already victimized me. He'll never let you rest till he's made you look through it and shown you how it works. Isn't that right, Andrews?"

Peter, still holding Carey firmly by the arm, had gradually advanced till they stood near the tripod. Andrews barely suppressed a squeal as Peter delivered a swift and apparently accidental kick on his shin.

"Sure, that's right. Step around here, Mr. Carey. You look through the finder here, and move this gauge along——"

Carey, finding himself crowded forward between the two men, bent reluctantly over the instrument.

"You sight it just the same as a gun," Peter remarked helpfully.

Carey glanced up over his shoulder and paused indecisively. The chatter of a squirrel in the branches overhead was suddenly loud in the hush that fell on the little group.

"Go ahead. There's nothing to be afraid of—it won't kill you," Peter urged with jocular emphasis.

Carey wavered an instant, then lowered his head to the level of the camera. Peter exhaled his breath in a long, audible sigh.

"Very pretty," Carey said politely.

"Yes, isn't it? We'll stroll along with you a little way and you can point out the best spots for pictures. I suppose you come down this way often, living so near and all?"

"Not very often." Without knowing exactly how he had become involved in the party, Carey found himself strolling

along the margin of the creek, his arm still firmly linked in Peter's.

"The water's getting very shallow," Peter remarked. "The stream dries up altogether in the summer."

Carey turned quickly. His face in the strong morning light was gray. The hollows beneath his cheek bones were patches of shadow.

"No," he contradicted in a curious breathless voice. "No, there's always water here."

"Positively not," Peter contradicted gaily. "You can see for yourself how the water's falling. Look here!" he pointed with an outstretched finger. "Here's something that must have been under moving water; and you see, it's high and dry now."

Peter thrust his leg backward, delivering another well-aimed kick on Andrews' ankle before he dropped Carey's arm in order to stoop forward.

"You see!" he said triumphantly. "Somebody's tried to drown a pair of shoes, but here they are." He waved the sandals in the air in front of Carey as he spoke.

Carey staggered backward.

"Put them—put them back," he stammered.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"Did you lose your footing? You have to be pretty careful along here—something unexpected is likely as not to trip you." Peter seemed oblivious of Carey's agitation. "Put them back? No, I think I'll keep them as a souvenir of the argument. They're plenty dry enough now." He thrust the slippers carelessly into his coat pocket as he spoke. "You look tired. Let's sit down and rest a bit. Andrews will want to take a picture of you, anyway, and this is as good a time as any for an interview."

Carey's thin frame seemed to have become boneless and fluid. His mouth hung half open as he sank back upon a log and leaned his head with closed eyes against a tree trunk.

"You've been overdoing," Peter said solicitously. "Very clever detective work it was, and you must feel proud of bringing a criminal to justice. 'Murder will out,' they say. There are lots of curious traditions about murder, most of them concerned with the way a murdered human being somehow retains a consciousness of the murderer—the bleeding corpse, and all that. By the way, will you lend me your knife for a moment? I've broken my pencil, and I'll want to take a few notes while you tell me all about how you solved the case that baffled the police."

Carey's hand stirred, then dropped to his lap.

"I haven't got it," he said in a strained, far-away voice.

"No? Well, it doesn't matter, for the moment. You're quite the leading character in the story now. Most detectives stick pretty close to earth, but you, although you're the

spiritual type, outwitted them all. Very smart of you to persuade Russell to dig up his gun and put it under the mattress, by telling him he'd rot away if he left it."

Carey's eyes opened, staring.

"Who said I told him to do it?"

"Of course you did. It was the only way to clinch his guilt. His confession, of course, can be ripped to shreds on cross-examination. However, I don't want to rob you of glory. You persuaded him to confess, too. You told him that if he confessed he couldn't be hanged, but that if he didn't you'd put a spell on him that would kill him, sure."

"The confession? What—what's wrong with it?"

"Lots of things. It's a beautiful example of suggestion on a weak mind. At that, he held out for three days. If the confession had been true, he'd have broken almost at once. It's much harder for a boy of his mentality to hold out against the truth than to hold out for it. He's very simple, as you know, and a lie is almost too complex for him to handle, at least under the difficult conditions of a police inquisition. But he forced himself to it at last. Someone had an influence on him stronger than the influence of the fear of conviction for murder. That influence was so strong that when he came face to face with it he gave up his feeble attempt to hint at the truth by implicating another person." Peter's voice had been quietly conversational, but it suddenly rose in a hoarse shriek.

"My God!" he screamed. "What's that?" He stared wildly over Carey's shoulder into the sunlit woods beyond.

Andrews leaped to his feet, knocking his camera to the ground, at the stricken terror of that cry.

"What——?"

But before Carey had time to turn, Peter was mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

"It's gone now," he said, with gasping relief.

In pulling out his handkerchief he had jerked the shoes

from his pocket and they rolled across the ground almost to Carey's feet.

"I thought I saw—Luna, with her hand raised, pointing," Peter explained in a low, shaken voice.

Carey shrank back against the tree trunk, his hands pressed against his eyes, his feet drawn back from the shoes that almost touched them.

"No," he said in a dead, flat voice. "No—no!"

Peter recovered his poise with amazing rapidity, though Andrews still felt unnerved from the effect of that terrible cry.

"There is a knife in your pocket, Carey," Peter said, resuming his tranquil, monotonous tone. "I know there is, because your hand reached for it. It is the knife that killed Luna. Otherwise you would not have been afraid to give it to me when I asked for it. It was really clever of you to keep on carrying it. You were afraid to hide it. If you had hidden it, and it had been found, it would immediately be a suspicious object. In your pocket it wasn't suspicious at all—that was the most natural place for it. But you couldn't keep Luna's shoes under water, Carey."

"For God's sake, Peter, have a heart!" Andrews appealed. He shrank with horrified pity from the gray mask of agony that was Carey's face. But Peter's voice was relentless—unmoved and inexorable as the voice of fate.

"The man who killed Luna was willing to let two men hang for it: first Vincent, and then, when Vincent was cleared, he tried to betray Russell to his death—Russell, who believed with childlike faith every word his friend told him. Why did you kill her, Carey? I don't think you were in love with her. The appeal of the flesh means little to you—yours are the crueler lusts of the spirit."

"No, I didn't love her—I worshipped her." In the extremity of his exhaustion, Carey's voice came like the voice of one hypnotized, mechanically and as if without volition.

"I worshipped her—until I found her out. I found out that she was a hypocrite and a blasphemer, ridiculing the powers she had sworn to serve. Then I pierced her black heart. But first, I gave her her chance—I gave her her chance, and she only laughed at me. She laughed—for the last time."

"How do you mean—you gave her her chance?" Peter's voice had become very gentle, as if he feared to disturb the current of Carey's thought.

"I had watched her. I began to suspect that she was false—using the mighty powers of darkness as a means to trap fools and win money and devotion from them. She thought I was a fool like the others." Carey still leaned back against the trunk with closed eyes, in an attitude that had relaxed from the tension of horror to a weary indifference. He seemed to be talking, not to Peter, but to himself, going back over ground that had become familiar from incessant repetition.

"I watched her until suspicion became certainty. I had watched Miller, too. I knew that he pretended to be a believer only because it gave him the opportunity to go to her as her lover. I slipped in when nobody was there—I saw the bathrobe cord hanging on the door. At last I went to her."

"That night?"

"That night. I went to her and accused her face to face. I accused her of her unbelief. I accused her of blaspheming the Prince of Darkness, of seeking only the power of this world. It was she who had made me believe—but, false as she was, she had opened the doors of truth to me. She was false, but she had put into my hands the keys of truth. I told her that she was not worthy—that she must yield her secrets to me and give me the scepter of leadership she was not worthy to hold. But first I bound her so that she would have to listen. I bound her so that she could not lay her hands on a charm—one of the charms she would not give me."

"And what did she say to that? I can't see Luna giving up without a struggle," Peter mused.

"That was when she laughed. She denied that she had any secrets, any spells to teach me. Not content with being false herself, she tried to tell me that the faith itself was false. 'If you must know, it's only suckerbait,' she said. 'As for letting you take my place, you can't. You haven't brains enough. If you don't like the things I do, you are free to leave. Expose me? Nobody can expose me. They'll keep on believing in me, as they'd never believe in you!' "

"I see," Peter said reflectively. "In other words, her being a fake made you ridiculous for having been taken in. You had to believe there was something in it, to save yourself from falling into the abyss. You couldn't bear to face your own ignominy. You were arch-egoists, both of you—she the triumphant and you the thwarted."

Carey opened his eyes. The dead pallor of his face wakened to flickering life.

"Not so thwarted, after all," he said with a flash of antagonism. "I have turned my back on this world with its worship of success. By the standards of this world I have been a failure. But even there—even there I have proved my superiority. I have beaten them on their own ground. You would never have found out except by magic. You would never have found out, if Luna had not risen from her grave to point at me!"

"We won't argue it for the moment," Peter said with a rather grim smile. "What I want to find out is, why did you shoot after you stabbed her?"

"I laid the love letters on her breast as a symbol of her perfidy. Then I heard a sound outside the window and ran out and found Russell. He wanted to see her turn into a black dog—and he had seen her death. I took his gun out of his hand and shot. I thought then that the police would find the gun immediately, and know that it was Russell's. I didn't

know then that he would bury it, or that it was Vincent they'd be looking for. But I knew Charlie was left-handed, and I knew that they'd look for a left-handed man. I thought of that just in time, before I stabbed her. You see, I am not so stupid as she thought me!"

"No, you weren't so stupid," Peter agreed. "But you and Luna both tried to live in two worlds, and they didn't mix very well. It would all have been quite simple and rational four hundred or so years ago. Luna tried to bring the old beliefs to life again, for her own advantage. And they did live. They rose up and destroyed her. But nobody can really go back. She turned the ancient cult of witchcraft into a modern confidence game, and you mixed your faith in magic with a Twentieth Century ingenuity in concealing crime."

"I don't call it crime—I call it vindication." Carey's pale eyes with their short sparse lashes shone with an almost colorless light. "I wasn't merely trying to frighten Russell when I told him that I would surely kill him by magic if he ever revealed what he had seen. It was true. Don't you know it's been done many times? And I had the means to do it. I could easily have got a hair from his head, a paring from his fingernails. I could have made a waxen image of him and melted it slowly before the fire."

"And the shell?" Peter dismissed the subject of waxen images for more practical concerns. "Did you plant that in his pocket?"

"Of course I didn't!" He picked it up from the ground without thinking, just as he said. I didn't even know he had it till the police found it in his pocket. Do you think I wanted Charlie to die? I didn't care about Vincent, but I didn't think they could hang Charlie, even if he did confess. I could make him do whatever I said. I could purify the ancient faith, and he would be the first of my followers. That is the great reality, to which the hocus-pocus of your courts of law are but a shadow."

"Well, in a way you're right," Peter conceded. "It wasn't the science of modern criminology with its microscopes that caught you—it was those shoes. On the modern side, even if you'd been suspected, you'd have got off for lack of evidence. And yet it was something pretty modern that turned the final trick. It was the fancy focusing device on Andrews' camera that gave me the idea you might be right-handed and have both your eyes, and yet have to sight through the left one. It wasn't really the action of a satanic spell that betrayed you—it was just my knowing that Luna's murderer would believe in that spell, and acting on the knowledge. Probably that's the way it was worked a good many times in the old days, too, if the truth were known."

Carey's figure had sagged forward, but he suddenly drew it erect and rose to his feet.

"But the spell did work," he said stubbornly. "So long as the shoes were under running water, I was safe. I don't suppose the judge and the jury will believe it, but it's true. In a way, I'm glad to have it over. They thought I was a weakling and a failure. But it took a power from beyond the boundaries of the world to conquer me, and when they hang me, I will die the death of a martyr." A proud smile curved the corners of his mouth.

A faint click sounded a few feet away, where Andrews had stood unobtrusively adjusting his camera.

"Got him—a good one," Andrews murmured to Peter. "Say, he's going to enjoy his trial so much that I bet he'll think it's worth hanging for. He'll be the king pin for once, and nobody can shove him off the center of the stage."

"Yes—I've never seen him look happy before. I suppose we're all egoists in a way. I know I quite resent being deprived of all the credit for my cute psychology and having it given to the working of a charm."

"I am ready any time," Carey said with a new dignity. "I suppose you will take me straight to the police station?"

"Well, that's the conventional thing to do with a captured murderer," Peter said somewhat tartly. He was still smarting under Carey's insistence that his efforts had had nothing to do with solving the crime. He glanced at his watch and stared for a moment at the sandals which still lay on the ground between them.

"But as a matter of fact," he added briskly, "the police will have to wait a little. I'm going to take you down to the *Herald* office first and hold you there till it's too late for the opposition to get the story. Then you can trot over to Oleson and be arrested. There are folks that will be hunting for our fingernails and sticking pins into our wax images, all right! I don't mind saying that it gives me some satisfaction to cultivate a belief in black magic—the good solid black of printer's ink when the other boys see the headlines on the 'D Home.' "

"That's all very well," Andrews complained, "but I'll bet I've got black and blue spots as big as a couple of dollars where you kicked me. Can't you make your hints a little less emphatic?"

"If that isn't just like a camera man!" Peter jeered as he once again hooked his arm through Carey's and led the way up the slope. "Here we romp in to the finish and scoop the world on a national crime story, and all he can think of is his shins!"

"Well, you may have scooped the world all right but you're certainly sending word to the nearest planets," Andrews grumbled. For Peter's jubilant whistle split the air in a series of wailing shrieks.

Andrews, panting in the rear with camera and tripod, hoped vainly that Peter's supply of breath would be exhausted but hadn't the heart to make any further efforts to stop him.

"Hey," he gasped as they reached the waiting Bossy. "Did you bring those shoes along?"

"Of course, you goof," Peter stopped whistling long enough to reply. "They're the most important evidence in the whole case. They'll be People's Exhibit Number One."

"I don't give a damn about the exhibits," Andrews retorted. "But when we get to the office, I want to get a shot of Carey holding them. It'll make a swell picture to liven up your story."

THE END

Whether you were keen enough to solve this Crime Club mystery in its early stages, or whether the author succeeded in keeping you in suspense up to the last chapter, Mastermind requests that you add to the next reader's enjoyment by remembering that—

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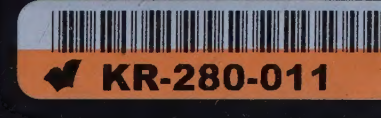
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